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Speaking Youth to Power

Influencing Climate Policy at the United Nations

Mark Terry

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My days as an environmentalist began before I had ever heard the word. My brother would take me on hikes and toboggan runs in Toronto's Don Valley when I was a child. I later would become a Boy Scout and upped my camping game. Travelling became a personal passion in my later years and I was able to combine it with my professional passion of filmmaking producing documentaries of exotic locations around the world in a time when they were called "Science & Nature" films. Eventually, the industry and the public started to call them "Environmental" films, and the now popular term, "Eco-Docs".

All this to say that many people throughout my own childhood youth as well as my adulthood youth have contributed significantly to my informed studies on climate change and youth activism.

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Introduction

There exists much scholarship on youth climate activism largely centred on the phenomenon and efficacy of the global youth climate marches known as the Fridays for Future protests as well as its impassioned leader, Greta Thunberg, and the representational politics of her eco-celebrity (Murphy 2021). Media outlets, academia, and the general public are keeping a close eye on the measurable impacts of such activism. Few question that these well-organized global protests conducted by youth have raised the level of awareness of the climate crisis among the world's population. Many also agree that they have increased pressure on all levels of government. However, this final step has yet to be realized to the degree that is necessary to arrest "the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 C above pre-industrial levels and (to pursue) efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 C above pre-industrial levels" ("Article 2,1", 3). Systemic change in the way the world engages with fossil fuels and other greenhouse gas-emitting practices and industries is often demanded, but is slow to evolve and be realized.

And when we get to this stage of environmental policy creation at the level of the United Nations, we see that the global community of youth is not present. Aside from participating in large numbers for protests, they do not seem to participate in large numbers in the global policy process regarding climate change, the cause they so passionately embrace today. This book will examine the various reasons for this such as their perception by power of being inexperienced in political processes, being formally uneducated in climate science, being seen historically as destructively

anarchistic in nature, and generally, being too young to provide any meaningful contribution. The investigation of this book posits that youth should be regarded as a global community marginalized by ageism and should be acknowledged in the same manner other marginalized global communities like Indigenous peoples are recognized in participatory politics. In particular, this book will look at how the United Nations is experimenting with programs and methods that begin to acknowledge this global community status and to take this group's unique perspectives and cultures into consideration during its negotiation sessions at the annual climate summits known more commonly as the COP conferences.

In an attempt to be comprehensive in this investigation, this book is divided into two sections of inquiry related to methods of engagement youth are currently using to achieve their goals with those in power: the *Groundswell Approach* and the *Direct Approach.* After examining the historical and theoretical aspects of each approach through existing scholarship, a framework for productive policy participation between youth and power is proposed and applied to current methods of engagement used by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to involve youth as a global community member in its annual climate policy sessions.

Chapter 1 looks at the foundational origins of youth activism dating back to 1815 through to the 1990s. The author acknowledges that there are many more youth movements during this period, but has selected these examples in particular as they best represent initial perspectives and methodologies of youth activism that have informed and inspired the behaviours and practices of today's youth climate activist.

The first example dates back to 1815 when the *Burschenschaft Movement* began in German universities. Informed by the work of historians L. F. Zwicker and Priscilla Robertson, we examine how European youth in Germany rebelled against the values of their adult counterparts in ways that are not unfamiliar to those who remember the hippies of the 1960s, distinguishing themselves, for instance, with unconventional attire for the time. These early youth activists sought for a dismantling of class structure, but not without disorder. The five university fraternities that originally formed the movement insisted their members continue with political education and gravitated to a "political stance that was Protestant, liberal, and German nationalist" (Zwicker, 399), a unique community of young people that represented "a new brand of liberalism" (Robertson, 368–9).

Elsewhere in Europe, the 1830s show us our first political youth movement, *Young Italy.*

The writings of the founder of the movement, Giuseppe Mazzini, a revolutionary of the time, and Lorraine Murray paint a picture of youth impressed by a charismatic leader who in a century and a half before the Internet grew his number of followers from 40 in 1831 to 50,000 in only two years, impressive even by today's social media standards. With a blend of Church and state in his rhetoric, Mazzini demanded his followers to take an oath of allegiance promising membership devotion to a cause that aimed to "constitute Italy one and free, independent, republican nation". While this sounded good to Italian youth in his speeches and on paper, its practice left something to be desired. The group's attempts at government insurrection in six Italian cities all met with failure. As inspiring a leader as Mazzini might have been, he could not mobilize his army of youth to violence and anarchy.

Seventy years later, another youth movement emerged in Germany this time not formed by students attending university, but by a teacher and nature lover named Karl Fischer. In 1901, he selected youth for camping expeditions outside of the urban centres and perhaps provided the model for the Boy Scouts seven years later. Here the work of historians Gabrielle Nagy, David I. Macleod, Oliver Coburn, John Alexander Williams, and Jon Savage are sourced to describe the *Wandervögel* ("wandering bird") *Movement*. A sense of community is again prevalent in these youth groups as is their desire to be separate and distinct from adult communities. This time, however, we see our fist keen interest in the environment and "field trips" as camping defined this movement. Organized by Fischer, parents were fine with these expeditions until girls began to become a part of the movement. Splinter groups soon formed that continued the field trips without adult supervision. One of the first European youth movements to expand outside the borders of its country of origin, the popularity of Wandervögel spread to Switzerland. Here, the young environmentalists evolved the movement and "created a commune that practiced vegetarianism, nature cures, and free love", another precursor to the hippie movement of the 1960s.

In 1918 in Argentina a new kind of youth movement was born out of the universities in Buenos Aires, San Miguel, and Córdoba. Research conducted by Natalia Milanesio, Rodrigo Arocena, and Judith Stutz informs us that the *University Reform Movement* was started by students rebelling against the structure of the Catholic-run school system that had been in place for hundreds of years in this South American country. They accused their professors of being "authoritarian, inefficient, clerically oriented, and

obscurantist" (Milanesio, 505) and were ultimately successful at reforming the post-secondary education system through a series of strikes, rallies, and petitions, an early indicator of the "School Strikes for Climate" popularized by Greta Thunberg 100 years later. This youth movement is significant in examining the youth climate movement today as it represents an educated group of youth (university students) applying their knowledge to recognize a flawed system (their own academic administration) and taking disruptive action (school strikes) to achieve positive change (university reform). Another interesting parallel to the youth climate movement of today is the international appeal of the cause. The success of the University Reform Movement in Argentina found followers in Peru, Chile, and Mexico between 1919 and 1921, all eager to achieve the same success in their own countries.

Forty years later in North America we begin to see one of the first transcontinental, if not global, youth movements: the Hippies and Yippies of the 1960s. Columns, articles, reports, and scholarship from Edward Kern, Michael Mandelbaum, Daniel Walker, Lee Jamieson, Sherri Cavan, Dan Rather, David Taylor, Sam Morris, and Abbie Hoffman paint a picture of a youth movement that grew in unintended directions and size. Beginning much like the youth of the Burschenschaft Movement with non-conformist clothing and the move-to-nature, drop-out ideology of the Wandervögel Movement, the hippies soon posed a threat to the status quo and became political in spite of itself. The subsequent splinter group, the Yippies, picked up the political mantle with the anarchistic and revolutionary passion the hippies were not prepared to embrace. The violence so eschewed by the hippies' mantra of "make love not war" was introduced in full force with the "police riots" of 1968 at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Significant in the evolution of youth climate activism in this era was an early interest in natural environments as opposed to urban environments and the political nature that the movement soon became. Also noteworthy is how these movements communicated to adults using artistic expressions (music, flash mobs, theatre). Making its appearance on the world stage was the television and its first international broadcast of a disgruntled community of youth attempting to disrupt the status quo and introduce social change. The hippie/yippie movements would not have grown to such global numbers without the aid of this electronic communications system. This will later serve as a model for digital communication through the Internet for a new generation of youth looking to dismantle

governments that not only tolerate but support systems that enable damage to the planet and the growth of climate change.

The final era this chapter examines are the decades that immediately followed: the 1970s and 1980s from a global perspective. With a healthy distrust of authority borne from the 1960s' altercations with police, the establishment, and "the man" in general terms, youth became more sceptical of both government and industry worldwide. Here we look at the phenomenon of Rachel Carson and her influential book *Silent Spring*. Described as a "fable", this work of fiction is based on facts related to a poisonous chemical found in pesticides at the time known as DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane). This artistic expression had a profound influence on the Kennedy administration in the USA resulting in the banning of the substance. Dubbed "The Gentle Subversive" and an "improbable revolutionary" by Mark Hamilton Lytle, American youth saw first-hand that you did not need to be a scientist, a politician, or even a trained journalist to be able to cause progressive social change in peaceful and non-violent ways. Claire Patterson, Barbara Scott Murdoch, and William Kovarik shed light on another environmental concern this time caused by leaded gasoline. In 1970, another victory over industry was achieved when the newly formed Environmental Protection Agency ordered car manufacturers to begin building engines to run on unleaded gasoline. Another careless use of environmentally dangerous chemicals and gases by business and industry emerged with the discovery of the ozone hole by Jonathan Shanklin of the British Antarctic Survey in 1985. However, unlike the other two examples of the use of DDT and leaded gasoline, industry did not resist to the same degree the banning of the substances they used to great extent in the manufacturing of aerosol spray cans. In fact, for the first time ever, the United Nations was instrumental in drafting an international agreement to ban the substances that was eventually signed by every country in the world. The Montreal Protocol gave a new generation of hope to youth that science, government, and business can come together in the face of a global environmental crisis to solve the problem, a hope that proves to inspire and fuel the youth climate movement in the years to come.

Chapter 2 examines the Groundswell Approach to youth climate leadership. There has seldom been a cause with so many high-profile leaders among its youth. This chapter will look at the inimitable Greta Thunberg, the current face of global climate youth activism, and those lieutenants in her ranks who attempt to imitate her reach, strength, and passion, but

serve effectively in disseminating her calls for action and expanding the reach and recruitment of the cause's global ranks. For a foundational understanding of youth's role in environmental causes, we take a page from Buckminster Fuller's apt metaphor of "Spaceship Earth", his ecological concept that humans are passengers on an intergalactic vessel and that we on this ship need to work together to keep it in proper working order, otherwise if damaged, the lives of all who travel in it are lost. This 1969 reference leads well into an early environmental youth group founded in 1990 called Eco-Kids, a youth movement that *TIME Magazine* called a "new generation of conservation-conscious, environmentally active schoolchildren" (Elmer-Dewitt, 51).

The phenomenon of Thunberg's appeal, power, celebrity, and influence will be seen through the lenses of research published by Jennifer Wright, Jonathan Watts, and Dorothy Lepkowska. To better understand her leadership appeal we apply the model developed by James MacGregor Burns in his Transformational Leadership Theory and its expanded version proposed by Bernard M. Bass. In applying the four elements of a transformational leader—*Idealized Influence*, *Inspirational Motivation*, *Intellectual Stimulation*, and *Individualized Consideration*—an additional context is provided to understand the success of Thunberg and her fellow youth climate leaders. With this theory applied we add the dimension of digital communications to understand how youth today expand their reach and their messaging and thereby magnify their presence and appeal to celebrity status. This chapter also briefly explores the power of such status and how relatively easily it is achieved in today's digital age.

A 2020 study conducted in Canada by MacEwan University (Edmonton) and Université du Québec (Trois-Rivières) reveals some enlightening data about the use of social media in organizing and broadcasting the Fridays for Future protests, most notably, that very little social media posts have anything to do with participant recruitment (only 4.8% on Twitter, for example). The impressive numbers of attendees and the global coordination speak to the success of the protests as an event, but critics such as Jens Marquardt are still waiting for tangible results and measurable impact.

The chapter concludes with case studies of youth climate activists who have not only subscribed to the Groundswell Approach and participated in climate strikes, but who also subscribed to the Direct Approach addressing the United Nations and its policymakers face-to-face.

Chapter 3 explores the methodologies being used by youth today as they apply the Groundswell Approach to their climate activism. Never

before has the global community of youth been so connected with communications taking place across the world instantly. For this chapter we examine the extensive research made by renowned digital media scholar Henry Jenkins first theoretically with his book *Spreadable Media* which provides keen insight on how youth are using social networks to advance their cause and recruit followers. We will then examine his more focused study on youth activism, *By Any Media Necessary*. By learning how youth engage with each other digitally in a participatory culture, we will learn how they are applying these practices to establish a similar relationship with the policymaker in a form of participatory politics. The research of sociologists Jacquelien van Stekelenburg and Bert Kandermans contributes to this discussion. This chapter will also review the latest statistics of use among the Internet's most popular social media platforms revealing some surprising results. Contextualizing this data for young climate activists is provided in a study conducted by Emily Wielk and Alecea Standlee in their research paper *Fighting for Their Future: An Exploratory Study of Online Community Building in the Youth Climate Change Movement*. Further social media analysis is provided by Christoph Herrmann, Sebastian Rhein, and Isabelle Dorsch whose study on networked social movements proposes three distinct identities among its users: individual, collective, and public. All three contribute to the cause, but in different ways. Understanding this allows for better targeted campaigns and more successful results.

Political anthropologists Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa shed light on the use and power of the hashtag (#) in supplemental information binning and specific communications. Their study, *# Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States*, presents the hashtag as a form of indexing system for micro details of macro events. It is also used as an entry to the climate discussion for the "lazy" climate activist by adding a hashtag to a comment or a picture defining the term "slactktivism" as coined by Ellen Simpson in 2018. While this might seem "the least they can do", it actually supports the Groundswell Approach in large numbers bolstering the global presence of youth climate activism online.

The chapter also includes the perspective of youth climate activist Jamie Margolin, a 21-year-old (as of 2022) American climate justice activist and co-executive director of *Zero Hour*, a "youth-led organization demanding

climate action".[1] We include her work *Youth to Power: Your Voice and How to Use It* as it serves as a "toolbox" for youth climate activism, according to Greta Thunberg, and speaks to the social media methodologies and options available.

Finally, this chapter identifies a couple of terms that are used throughout the rest of the book: the *Citizen Scientist* and the *Citizen Journalist*. These titles reflect untrained people working in the fields of research and reporting usually under the guidance and direction of professionals in the field. Their contribution to research, data, and documentation manifests a new facet of the Groundswell Approach and provides the scientific community and media coverage valuable data and images that may have been overlooked throughout the world.

In the last chapter on the Groundswell Approach and the first half of this book, we examine a series of case studies from around the world when youth were given "a seat at the table". Beginning with a 2017 study conducted by Canada's Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), we see the mutual benefits of participatory policy creation for both government officials and youth climate activists. While well-intentioned, the report warns of agendas set by the policymakers. Youth agendas set by adults who hold this opinion might focus on young people's shortcomings and problems rather than invest in youth's potential as a positive source of change (OECD 2017). How this can be overcome is explored through an examination of a variety of strategies presented by Luke Spajic, Georgia Behrens, Sylvia Gralak, Genevieve Moseley, and Daniel Lindolm in their 2019 commentary piece for *The Lancet* entitled "Beyond Tokenism: Meaningful Youth Engagement in Planetary Health".

One of the strategies for meaningful collaboration between youth and policymaker comes from South Africa in its Youth Climate Action Plan. The national framework is built upon "five core pillars": *Intersectionality; Advocacy and Activism for Climate Action; Good Governance; Systemic Change; Environmental Sustainability.*

Another strategy from the Netherlands proposes the creation of a series of position papers and manifestos created together with youth: "By entering into discussions on behalf of our supporters with politicians, policymakers and the business community, we give young people a voice in their own future", according to the Dutch youth climate organization

[1] https://pulsespikes.org/story/zero-hour

Jonge Klimaatbeweging (Youth Climate Movement). These documents are then shared with partner countries Uganda, Bangladesh, Chile, Egypt, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa, India, and Qatar so their governments and youth climate activists can use them as models for their own policies in yet another example of the Groundswell Approach to establishing progressive climate policy with youth having a seat at the table.

The conclusion of the first part of this book details a proposed framework for using the Groundswell Approach by youth climate activists. The PLAN model stands for **P**rotest Protocol, **L**eadership, **A**ction, and **N**exus. This recommended infrastructure takes into account the successful elements of the Groundswell Approach and offers strategies that could address the shortcomings currently experienced.

Chapter 5 represents the introduction of a proposed framework informed by the successes and challenges of the Groundswell Approach. It takes into account the methods and strategies of engagement with government officials in a more straightforward way: the *Direct Approach*. This model proposes five components that need to be present for representative, inclusive, and ultimately successful climate policy creation in full participation with youth. The five areas are:

1. *Access*: Members of the global community of youth need to know that invitations and opportunities exist for direct engagement with policymakers. Access to these opportunities must be provided by the UN through channels familiar to youth for meaningful discourse.
2. *Respect*: Both parties need to enter policy collaboration with an open mind since neither party is fully aware of each other's perspectives and experiences. Efforts to learn and understand these defining characteristics will facilitate discussions. Regarding youth as a separate and distinct global community, as well as its inherent sub-cultures and differences within itself, acknowledges a culture that the policymaker needs to consider for fully inclusive and representative climate policy.
3. *Collaboration*: Youth must be prepared to conduct research and present reliably researched evidence that may be absent from the policymaker's understanding of the community's unique relationship with the impacts of climate change. The policymaker, in turn, needs to be open to assigning such knowledge collection and accepting it as reliable representations of that community's culture.

4. *Finance*: Funding programs and relative mechanisms need to be provided to supplement opportunities for direct engagement. Many young people cannot afford the travel to the policymaker's offices and many policymakers do not have a specific budget to travel to various and remote communities of youth leadership. It therefore becomes apparent that UN-sponsored funding programs need to be established to facilitate mutually agreeable places for engagement.
5. *Authorship*: Youth need to be able to contribute directly to policy writing and feel they have some acceptable degree of ownership with the drafted policy. Review and approval phases for youth would contribute to this. This component ensures that the voice of youth is not only heard, but is accurately represented in any ensuing policy.

Informing this framework are three previous models proposed at different times in the lifespan of contemporary youth activism: Roger A. Hart's "Ladder of Participation" (1992) prepared for and published by UNICEF; Harry Shier's "Pathways to Participation" (2001); and Helen Cahill and Babak Dadvand's "7 Ps of Participation" (2018). Shier's Pathways model was inspired by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child's Article 12 which provides for state parties to acknowledge and make allowances for participation of youth in policy matters that impact on them. With these two UN-inspired and produced models, Cahill and Dadvand expanded these frameworks to include seven areas, all beginning with the letter "p", to advance the participatory opportunities and ideology of youth involvement with policy creation. The "7 Ps" are:

1. Purpose
2. Positioning
3. Perspectives
4. Power Relations
5. Protection
6. Place
7. Process

The 7 Ps is a valuable model of youth participation with political power as it incorporates the strengths of the previous models proposed by Hart and Shier, and fleshes out some of the considerations suggested, but not directly addressed by the previous models such as Place and Power Relations. Collectively, all three models serve to inform a new proposed

framework made in this book. It should be noted that the author is also informed by his own direct experiences attending the annual United Nations climate summits, the COP conferences, from 2009 to 2022. In this capacity, direct field research and observations are made with respect to youth representation and the use of film by youth as an effective communications tool in participating in these conferences with the policymaker.

Analysis of this model and the practical applications of them are examined through the extensive scholarship provided by Harriet Thew and her valuable work on youth and their relationship with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In particular, the Direct Approach is applied to three of her published works to illustrate the effectiveness of the method:

- *Youth Participation and Agency in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (2018);
- *"Youth is Not a Political Position": Exploring Justice Claims-making in the UN Climate Change Negotiations* (2020); and
- *"You Need a Month's Holiday Just to Get over It!" Exploring Young People's Lived Experiences of the UN Climate Change Negotiations* (2022).

The UNFCCC experiences of both Thew and myself, in concert with the models of youth participation proposed in previous years by Roger A. Hart (1992), Harry Shier (2001), and Helen Cahill and Babak Dadvand (2018), collectively contribute to the philosophy of the Direct Approach proposed in this chapter and throughout this book.

Chapter 6 extends the investigation of how the Direct Approach is used between youth and the UNFCCC comparing it against the Groundswell Approach in terms of effectiveness in giving youth a participatory voice at the COP conferences. Political scientist Jens Marquardt casts doubt on the efficacy of the Fridays for Future protest marches acknowledging their success in sparking debate on taking urgent action on climate change, but pointing out that "the movement's broader societal and political implications are yet to be seen" (Marquardt, 2).

In this chapter we also hear from the policymaker who seems to side with the Direct Approach as a means of engaging with youth productively. A recent study of climate protests among young people in Canada found that Members of Parliament (MPs) found a *Direct Approach* would be