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Youth and Politics in the Argentine Context: Belief, Assessment, Disposition, and Political Practice among Young Students (2010-12)

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This paper addresses the relationship between youth and politics in Latin America with a focus on the concern in the 1990s with political “apathy” among youth, which was replaced at the start of the new millennium by the “politicisation” of youth. Nevertheless, these trends have not been sufficiently studied to date, rendering the gathering of empirical evidence necessary. In Argentina, youth participation has increased due to the re-politicisation of society, a framework that was developed as a result of the national reconstruction project implemented after the 2001 economic crisis. In connection with these changes, it is necessary to provide empirical evidence to support the attributed relationship between youth and politics to characterise the dimensions of this relationship. We present the results of research (2010-2012) on students (N=273) at seven middle schools in Buenos Aires obtained using a written questionnaire that included items related to the following: a) a belief in and the assessment of politics and politicians and b) dispositions and political participation practices

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Mots-clés :

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1. Presentation

At the beginning of the new millennium, important transformations began to occur in terms of the social participation and visibility of youth in the public sphere, altering the idea prevailing during the 1990s that youth had become de-politicised (for an international perspective, see Hahn, 2006; Locally: Chaves, 2005; Sidicaro & Fanfani, 1998) and signalling a change toward youth “politicisation”. This change occurred earlier in Latin America than in Europe and the US, primarily because of the global financial crisis that produced an outbreak of neoliberal policies and consequent adjustment measures, against which youth protested and mobilised significantly. The case of Argentina was particularly symbolic of the severity of the coming crisis – which culminated in the 2001 milestone the “Argentinazo”1 – the people’s dismissal of the government and the subsequent absence of leadership2 and integral default in the country. These events resulted in a national reconstruction process that promoted the interests of youth, who identified with the actions taken and the significance of the rejection of politics (Kriger, 2010), allowing a type of counter-democratic citizenry to be created (Rosanvallon, 2006). This trend began to emerge during the last decade, when

a rehabilitation of politics occurred among general society; young people were involved, particularly through the following: a) greater access to more formal modes of participation, which stressed a revival of the student movement and its struggles "from below", particularly in the years since 2006 (Nuñez, 2008 and 2010; Kriger, 2012b); b) formal responses to their interpellation of national government decisions made "from above", which allowed a milestone to be reached during the eruption of the youth movement in the wake of Nestor Kirchner's leadership and President Cristina Kirchner's call to continue his legacy. These conditions necessitate re-examination of the problem as one of greater complexity and the development of an understanding of the processes that occurred between the two terms, which are to be understood not as states but as points associated with a permanent and heterogeneous social dynamic. Conversely, it is necessary to develop a concept of politics that can integrate the tension between *policy and politics* (Lefort, 1992; Mouffe, 2007), a relationship that enduringly constructs society and is understood as a shared world of historical depth and power projection (Kriger, 2010).

In response, by articulating a psychological and sociological viewpoint, we were able to discover a broader understanding of youth, politics, and the nation[3] among Argentine students (2010-2012), which corresponded with findings potentially relevant to students' connection with politics. For the investigation, we proposed psychological variables intended to establish a relationship between level of representation (*belief and assessment*) and action (*disposition and participation*). We noted that in the semiotic construction of values, people consider aspects that they consider valid to orient their actions (Rosa-Rivero, González & Barbato, 2009) and their own personal values such that they can act in accordance with their established social constructions (Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Blasi, 2005). We developed our first hypothesis based on findings obtained in previous empirical research that was conducted in a similar context with a similar population during the crisis in Argentina (Kriger, 2007), which supposes that youth negatively assess politics (which they consider intrinsically corrupt: everything it touches, it corrupts) in absolute terms, lack belief in the capability to provide for the common good, and refuse to participate in politics.

In this sense, we asked in this paper if in the current context (Kriger, 2012b) – the present, in which the national project and the increased presence of youth in the public sphere are being consolidated – whether belief in and the assessment of politics will be more positive than they were several years ago. Next, we asked whether this change is absolute, or if there is an integrated difference in opinions regarding politics as an ideal and political actors as actual politicians.

Next, we decided to investigate other issues, such as possible types of action that would provide a framework for the social rehabilitation of politics and whether a belief has emerged that politics are a democratic practice linked to the common good through successful production among young people of a greater interest in and desire to participate. Thus, we defined four dimensions to examine: the first two address psychological variables linked to motivation: *thebelief in and the assessment* of politics. Although we used the classification of variables discovered by Hahn (2006) as a general

empirical reference, both variables can be confidently related conceptually and understood as producers of a "quality that increased legitimacy, adding to their procedurally strict characters a moral dimension (integrity broadly defined) and a substantial dimension (the concern for the common good)" (Rosanvallon, 2006:22). The other two dimensions investigate attitudes towards politics through the concepts of *disposition* and *participation* based on past, present, and potential experiences in combined areas with varying types and degrees of politicisation. We first considered the relation between immediate personal interest and the motives linked to the context, which were categories, developed using youth's replies to open questions in previous studies (Kriger, 2010) and the pilot component of this study. We defined three choices: a) low, linked to the reason for an individual's preference/interest; b) high, linked to the reason for common commitment; and c) uninhibited, which refers to fear of participating and the transmission of an intergenerational anti-political mandate linked to past traumatic experiences with the dictatorship and the disappearance of persons (Kriger, 2009). Regarding the *participation* variable, we considered broader feelings towards politics (Vommaro, 2012), and we developed categories based on the areas for which the participants were in agreement with tradition and exhibited correspondence to the social achievements of youth. We considered areas linked to the political-state system and its representative forms of "democratic expression" to be traditions (Rosanvallon, 2006) and civil citizenship and direct forms of citizen participation through "democratic values" and "intervention" to be non-traditional (Rosanvallon, op. cit). As a paradigm of the first type, we used a "political party", *uncommon* for youth, and we considered "student centres" to be an expression of the same dynamic at a *common* level. Regarding the non-traditional, we used "social movement", which in the "transformation of the democracy" (Rosanvallon, 2006: 37) has come to constitute a large portion of political activity but was previously concentrated entirely within parties; it is *common* among youth in its grassroots nature. In Argentina, this trend took an odd turn after 2003 with the Kirchernism Movement, which emerged from the crisis of the political system (Perez & Natalucci, 2012), and developed into an ideology that was integrated into the mainstream, occupying a large umbrella in favour of organisations at all points of the ideological spectrum, recreating a "movementist ideology" (Peréz & Natalucci, 2012: 11). Last, we considered the "environmental group", which is linked to a global cause and youth identity, a distant non-traditional model.

2. State of the Investigation

Today, in Latin America, there are several sources of empirical research on young people and politics, such as the fields of Sociology and Political Science (Alvarado & Vommaro, 2010; Kriger, 2012a; Perez & Natalucci, 2012), Anthropological and Cultural approaches (Alvarado, 2012; Chaves, 2009; Saintout, 2010), and Psycho-Cultural studies (Carretero & Kriger, 2008, 2010 and 2011; Kriger, 2010; Ruiz Silva & Prada, 2012). In the particular field of Political Psychology, we find that several perspectives are emphasised, including the following: a) the investigation of political actions, beliefs, and socio-democratic political attitudes versus the continuity of authoritarian attitudes

(D'Adamo & García Beaudoux, 1996); b) the investigation of the conventional/non-conventional political actions and the socio-political attitudes of college students (Benbenaste & Delfino, 2006; Delfino, Fernández & Zubieta, 2007); c) the examination of political participation (Defino & Zubieta, 2011), as understood by Booth and Seligson (1978) as a behaviour that influences or is intended to influence the distribution of public goods, demonstrated as having low-level importance for youth who, in this context, belong to political associations or groups, have a preference for incremental and gradual political change, and have a strong interest in politics but exhibit low active participation; d) identification of the various political practices that link citizens to the political system, incorporating an unconventional sense of political action that includes Sociopolitical participation among youth (Imhoff, Gutiérrez & Brussino, 2009; Brussino, Medrano, Sorribas & Rabbia, 2011); e) the development of a broader framework for research than what is presented here regarding the following: the social representation of politics and the nation (Bruno, Barreiro & Kriger, 2011 and 2012b), dispositions regarding participation and social capital (Kriger & Dukuen, 2012), the relation between citizenship and participation practices (Kriger & Fernández Cid, 2011), and subjective policies and education (Kriger & Rybak di Segni, 2011); and developing an understanding of recent history and current political thinking (Kriger, 2011).

3. The Study

We present the partial results of recent empirical research (2010-2012) on youth, politics, and the nation conducted with students (n=273) aged 17 and 18 at seven schools in Buenos Aires and the surrounding areas and representing different socio-economic levels[4]. We used a 32-item written questionnaire developed ad hoc for this research, and we will present the results obtained for four items (15, 16, 25, and 26) that investigate the link between youth and politics, outlined by four dimensions: belief, assessment, disposition, and participation.

Item 15 investigates the relation between *belief in politics and politicians* based on the question, "What are your opinions on politics and politicians?", the possible answers for which are as follows: a) "I believe in politics but not in politicians" (relatively differentiated[5]),b) "I believe in some forms of politics and in some politicians" (relatively undifferentiated), c) "I do not believe in politics nor in politicians" (negatively integral assessment), and d) "I believe in politics and in politicians" (integrally positive).

Item 16 investigates the *assessment of politics* as a tool for the building of society through the question, "What are your political opinions?", the options being as follows: a) "Politics are good but often misused" (relatively positive), b) "Politics are fundamental to the building of society" (integrally positive), c) "Politics corrupts everything it touches" (integrally negative); and d) "Politics are bad but necessary for democracy" (relatively negative).

Item 26 investigates *immediate and personal disposition to participate in politics*. The question states, "Mark the option that best describes your feelings with respect to the

importance of participating in politics", for which the following options are provided: a) "I prefer to do other things" (low disposition), b) "I think it is necessary" (high disposition), and c) "It scares me" (uninhibited disposition).

Item 25 investigates effective *past, present, and potential participation*. The question asks, "Have you participated, do you participate, or do you plan to participate in any of the following groups?" for which the following answers are provided: a) political party (traditional, uncommon), b) social movement (non-traditional, common), c) student centre (traditional, common), and d) environmental group (non-traditional, uncommon).

4. Presentation and Analysis of Results

Table 1 - Belief in Politics and Politicians ("What are your opinions on politics and politicians?")

	Frequency	**Percentage**
a. RELATIVELY DIFFERENTIATED ("I believe in politics but not in politicians")	119	43.6
b. RELATIVELY UNDIFFERENTIATED ("I believe in some forms of politics and in some politicians")	106	38.8
c. INTEGRALLY NEGATIVE ("I do not believe in politics or in politicians")	45	16.5
d. INTEGRALLY POSITIVE ("I believe in politics and in politicians")	2	.7
e. NO RESPONSE	1	.4
Total	273	100.0

Overall, the relative viewpoint was most prevalent, with options a and b being chosen by 82.4% of the participants, and the integrally positive belief being chosen by .7%. We also found that the integrally negative belief significantly outperformed the integrally positive belief by 15.8 percentage points. Next, if we incorporate the distinct relationship between belief in politics and belief in politicians, we observe a higher percentage chosen for option a: 43.6%. This result could indicate a more complex concept and could overcome the intrinsically negative concept of politics, which favours the possibility of analysis over the actions of historical subjects.

Table 2 - Assessment of Politics ("What are your opinions on politics?")

	Frequency	**Percentage**
a. RELATIVELY POSITIVE ("Politics are good but often misused")	169	61.9
b. INTEGRALLY POSITIVE ("Politics are fundamental to building society")	52	19.0
c. INTEGRALLY NEGATIVE ("Politics stains everything it touches")	26	9.5
d. RELATIVELY NEGATIVE ("Politics are bad but necessary for Democracy")	26	9.5

Total	273	100.0

First, the results demonstrate that the vast majority of the youths, 80.9%, possess a positive conception of politics as a tool for building society (options: b and a). However, it is significant that 61.9% expressed a negative opinion of its usages (option a), which indirectly implicates politicians, whereas the integrally positive option (b) was only chosen by 19%. Finally, only 19% of the sample expressed a negative view (9.5% for option c and 9.5% for option d).

Table 3 - Dispositions Regarding Political Participation ("With which of these options do you most identify regarding the importance of political participation?")

	Frequency	**Percentage**
LOW DISPOSITION (" I prefer to do other things")	165	60.4
b. HIGH DISPOSTION ("I think it is a necessary compromise")	79	28.9
c. UNINHIBITED DISPOSITION ("It scares me")	23	8.4
d. NO RESPONSE	6	2.2
Total	273	100.0

It is striking that 60.4% of the participants have a limited or reluctant disposition (option a) to participate, whereas less than half – only 28.9% – have a high disposition (option b) and are totally positive. Moreover, it is significant that only 8.4% admitted being afraid to become involved in politics at the present time, indicating the presence of an underlying key transmission from the past repressive dictatorship

Table 4 - Political Participation ("Have you participated, do you participate, or do you plan to participate in any of the following groups?")

In this table, we observe that in general, effective participation is the lowest and absolute negative the highest and that the greatest amount of distance exists between these options. In the first case, there is a notable difference between the areas close to the young people's living quarters, such as student centres (8.1%), and environmental groups (1.8%), and political parties (2.2%). In the second case, it is important to note the high percentage obtained for absolute negative with regard to the three participation possibilities, which span all areas: an average percentage of 54.9%. In turn, it is relevant to note the particularly high result for favoured practice: 65.2%. Regarding the potential to participate, the highest percentage, 36.6%, is found for the environmental group, which accounts for the identification of a global cause that is transversal and strictly concerns youth. Finally, it is noted that in reference to the past experience ("participated"), all of the percentages were much higher than today, being twice as high on average (8.8% vs. 4.4%), which invites inquiry into the reasons for the decrease. The highest percentage for the former,

16.1%, was found for student centres and, the lowest, 3.7%, for political parties, which is consistent with the subjects' ages and the areas in which they work.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

At the beginning of this study, we questioned the radical transition from the alleged de-politicisation of the 1990s to the present politicisation, and we decided to obtain evidence to explain this process in a more complex manner based on a psychological perspective. Considering that in the Argentine context, recent major changes have transformed the relationship between society and politics, particularly in terms of the visibility and recognition of youth as political actors, we decided to determine how this change was specifically expressed through representations (beliefs, values) and attitudes (dispositions and participation). To provide a fundamentally empirically based view of a recognised social politicisation process, being careful to not confound the moralising assessment of politics – before, "bad"; today, "good" – and politics' substantial claim as a means of the construction of a common goal, we investigated and placed dialogue in various dimensions regarding how the effects of politics affect young Argentine students.

In terms of political representation, we found that both the belief in politics and the assessment of politics to be positive, although only in relative terms. This result is interesting because it suggests an incremental approach to politics that incorporates a degree of "distrust in the democracy" (Rosanvallon, 2006: 26), which is linked to the control of citizens through the exercise of political power. We believe that this result could indicate a broader reconciliation between citizens and the politics of Argentina after the virtual divorce following the 2001 economic crisis, which was vital to the recognition of some of the evidence obtained from this experience. In addition, in terms of both belief and assessment, the prevailing viewpoint distinguished between the use of politics as a tool and politicians' uses of it deserves emphasis. In the first case, the percentage of respondents who chose the option "I believe in politics but not in politicians" was substantial (43.6%), and in the second case, "Politics are good but often misused" was often chosen (61.9%). This result indicates a significant departure from the findings obtained in previous studies in the same context (Kriger, 2010), in which views of politics were inherently negative and undifferentiated ("It stains everything that it touches", "What it is involved with, it corrupts"[6]). However, politics has been restored to political legitimacy (the percentage of absolute negative views does not reach 10%), regardless of belief (trust) in actual politicians, which has been maintained but has also exhibited signs of recovery in terms of the 33.8% who believe "in some forms of politics and in some politicians". In short, young people appear to have access to a broadened horizon, enabling politics perhaps to be used once again one day in addressing their own generational challenges.

Concerning attitudes towards politics, we investigated dispositions and current and potential participation, for which we found that as we progress from level of representation to action and personal involvement, the link weakened. The most

vehement participants who were apparent amid the data were as follows: the 60.4% of youth who “prefer to do other things” and the 54.9% who have not participated, do not participate, and will not participate in any of the proposed policy areas. This result is significant in this context because the generalised politicisation of youth is often supplied as a self-evident fact in public discourse and in terms of social perception, as supported by the increasing presence of youth in the public sphere but not by empirical observations7. Thus, consistent with other studies, which depict policy representations as more positive, centrally underlying the association with “corruption” (Bruno, Barreiro & Kriger, 2011), young people tend to build citizenship models that value individual citizen practices over collective practices and tend to distance themselves from direct action (Kriger & Fernández Cid, 2011).

More specifically, and in relation to the fields of interest, we highlighted the increase in social movement in terms of political parties, particularly in terms of past and present participation. This result is expected because of the proximity and youthful character of the former, particularly because the Greater Buenos Aires area has been growing since the 1990s in terms of territory and political participation, including forms of popular and singular youth activism (Vázquez & Vommaro, 2008) without institutional intervention (Grimson, 2003). The opposite occurs with the “environmental group”, which exhibits the highest potential disposition (36.6%) and the lowest current disposition (1.8%) as an uncommon and non-traditional option; this result indicates identification with a world/generational cause that is valued as important, although perhaps not immediately.

On a related note, it is striking that the percentages of effective participation in all areas are noticeably higher for the past than for the present. This result could attributed to various causes, such as a lack of current interest or disappointment or failure in past experiences, but in all cases, it becomes important to investigate this issue in depth through a qualitative application, primarily because we are working with a hypothesis of increased politicisation.

The results that we have presented in this study encourage us to address politicisation not as a point of arrival but as a process that is highly heterogeneous and related to multiple historical variables, both psychosocial and inter-subjective. From this perspective, it is possible to interpret the integrated ambiguities and promote the key understandings of the current case. In this sense, in comparison with the radically negative viewpoint discovered in previous studies (Kriger, 2007 and 2010), 28.9% of youth currently adhere to the idea that “politics are a necessary compromise”, resulting in promising data (even in comparison with the 60.4% that “prefer to do other things”). However, in turn, this result poses a great challenge if we compare it with the 5.8% who presently actively participate compared with the 83.1% who exhibit the highest qualifying positive beliefs and relatively positive assessments and positive integrals. In short, what these data suggest is that in terms of levels of representation and action, the link between youth and politics loses intensity, even when there are elements signalling a positive change in terms of belief and assessment, even when expressed in terms of disposition, and even less in terms of participation. It is on the connection

between these elements that we should focus our efforts to promote political education, enabling the development of important individual representations and collective action and politics as a joint entity.

1 On the 19th and 20th of December, 2001, after the majority of the public's savings were confiscated, there was a massive protest in the streets of several cities, particularly Buenos Aires. Amidst the sound of banging pots and use of the slogan "throw them all out", the public protest led to the resignation of the entire national government.

2 In this sense and from a cognitive perspective, we presumed that access to political thought is a process of cultural development, through which political subjects are configured as "social agents that possess consciousness over historical depth, call themselves the makers of future decisions and are responsible for the actions taken in the political dimension, although they cannot calculate or control all of the consequences, resonances, or scope thereof (Kriger, 2010:23)".

3 The study was conducted under the direction of Dr. M. Kriger and explores the relationships among the development of national identity, historical understanding, and political thought.

4 The study was conducted in seven middle schools, five public and two private, defined by the schools' geographic locations and the education levels and employment status of the students' parents. The schools are as follows: one elite school, one characterised by a high socio-economic level, two at a medium level, one popular baccalaureate school, and two low-socioeconomic-level schools.

5 Next, we placed in brackets the literal answer choice and the name assigned to the theoretical category, which was listed in the analysis for the researchers but not the questionnaire given to the participants.

6 Something similar, also referred to as corruption, lies within a different context. Hahn's study demonstrates how this belief is present among students in England, the US, and Germany (Hahn, 2006).

7 Although there are numerous works on new forms of participation that have emerged in the past decade, they do not account for the general mass politicisation of youth, the increase in their participation and, above all, the changes in patterns of militancy.

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