

**Radical Inheritance:
Political Memory and Identity in Modern American Far-Left Families**

Elyna Volkova
Temple University Honors Program
Honors Senior Project

Advisor:
Dr. Marina Mikhaylova

1. Introduction

My father first explained class analysis to me around age 8. A child of schoolteachers from Donetsk Oblast, Ukrainian SSR, he had a happy childhood in the Soviet Union and was devastated by the capitalist excesses that followed its fall. As a child, I was struck by my father's critiques on the society I was growing up in. Watching my middle-class suburbanite classmates, I felt I had been robbed of a politically ignorant childhood, in which I could get the new iPhone without thinking about imperialist resource extraction. American cultural identity rang completely hollow in my ears. While I found some of my father's statements outrageous, he gave me a vague sense of justice which I channeled into learning how to articulate various social causes, starting with feminism in middle school and continuing into my choice of major at university. Thus, politics entered my life in a very specific way—in a way related to class, current events, developmental periods, and especially related to the particular narratives and communicative modes employed in my home life.

Feminist Carol Hanisch famously argued that “the personal is political” (Hanisch 1969). Personal experience reflects political conditions, and political forces and discourses become manifest in individuals through thoughts, feelings, and actions. The American child of far-leftists is a special case where spoken problematization of the American political project is embedded in one's earliest relationships, where many social interfaces are consciously and immediately the site of political thinking. In addition, far-leftism in the United States has a unique recent history. Since the 90s, there has been no international or consolidated far-leftist body, a fragmented and digitized US body politic, and a narrowing realm of political possibilities. In this project, I track the personal, the political, and their interactions in a cohort of young adults raised in view of a

long past and an alternative future. Through eight semi-structured interviews with adults who grew up with far leftist parents, I address these questions:

- (1) How does having parents on the far left affect young adults' political orientations? How do they feel, articulate, and act on their politics?
- (2) What forms of political memory are salient for these young adults? What does the state of the current American political environment mean to them?
- (3) What meanings do these young adults personally ascribe to their upbringings? How do they orient themselves in relation to the future?

I find that leftist childhood provides resources—practices, knowledge, and values—that allow or encourage individuals to assume politics as a central way to conceptualize themselves and their environments. In a time of perceived crisis, these resources are mobilized to create varying individual responses to political uncertainty.

For a precedent to the leftist childhood, one might look to political psychology or sociology. The possibility of refuting the fundamental assumptions of neoliberal capitalism is omitted from most of American political psychology (Bettache 2025), and the population of kids from radical families is likely too small or ill-defined to be of interest to sociology. The field that houses the most literature on people with my upbringing is history; specifically, communist history. Historians of American communism underwent a “biographical turn” in the 90s, shifting their attention to the personal impact of party membership or activism—including impacts on the family. The most well-known of the works on communist families might be *Red Diapers: Growing Up in the Communist Left* by Judy Kaplan and Linn Shapiro (1998), an anthology of short essays by “red diaper babies” (a dated term for children of Communist Party members) of the 1930s-1970s. There is also *Raising Reds: The Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and*

Communist Political Culture in the United States by Paul Mishler (1999), an investigation of American Communist political education and its institutions. Apart from the biographical turn of communist history, children of New Left radicals have also published a number of autobiographies exploring that historical moment. Notable of these are the podcast *Mother Country Radicals* by Zayd Ayers-Dorhn (2022), son of Weather Underground leader Bernadine Dorhn, and the book *Radical Son* by red diaper baby-turned-neoconservative David Horowitz (1998).

Tentative themes can be drawn from these works about the child of communists during this time. The authors of *Red Diapers* identify a few which I found to be consistent across sources:

- “(1) the centrality of left-wing politics to everyday life,
- (2) an oppositional identity,
- (3) a heightened historical awareness,
- (4) a feeling of connection to an international community of people working for social change,
- (5) a belief that one person’s actions can make a difference and that by working together people can radically change society.” (Kaplan and Shapiro, 9)

While political parties did have party lines on education and child-rearing, these were hotly debated, and approaches varied between families, sometimes along class or ethnic lines. But the strength (and mere fact) of oppositional politics in the family left a lasting impression on children. Adults recounting their leftist childhoods bring up varied emotions ranging from pride and nostalgia to anger and regret. Social isolation, ideological confusion, and parental distance due to activism were common, sometimes life-altering experiences. At the same time, a

significant portion said they appreciated the emphasis on critical thought and social justice, and derived camaraderie from their youth groups. Many went on to be highly progressive, although not necessarily anti-establishment, and often became activists, writers, lawyers, or therapists. Radicalization did occur, as did complete disillusionment with ideological projects. Sometimes, children swung to the right in the face of massive, reality-breaking contradictions. Their experiences were about as diverse as those of children in the political mainstream, and yet all undeniably tinted, subsumed, and/or redirected by their parents' ideology.

I take a view of these experiences as developing political subjectivity. In the next section, I review supporting literatures on political socialization and radicalization, explain why these are insufficient to address my research questions, and discuss my main theoretical approaches to political subjectivity. After providing brief profiles of the interviewees, I examine their accounts of political upbringing and experience across three domains: family socialization, socialization outside the family, and political memory. The discussion considers how these diverse accounts illustrate the strengths of a subjectivity-based approach to political socialization and highlight the close relationship between personal and political experience.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Political Socialization and Radicalization

Political socialization is an interdisciplinary field concerned with the transmission of political attitudes, engagement, and behaviors across the life history (Neundorf and Smets 2015; Hyman 1959). Initially, this field was preoccupied with the idea that parental political orientations, particularly in highly political families, often passes down to children (Dennis and Mccrone 1970; Jennings and Niemi 1974). More recently, researchers have recognized that political socialization happens across the life course and that children are agents in their own

socialization (Niemi and Hepburn 1995). For example, researchers have suggested that children will often argue with their family's politics as a form of identity formation and will be less likely to accept their family's politics if they are paying attention to other political stimuli (Dinas 2014; McDevitt and Ostrowski 2009; Wong and Tseng 2008). Thus, current frameworks of political socialization usually involve some consideration of developmental stage, immediate social environment, and sometimes political regime or conflict (Sears and Brown 2023). These insights are useful for conceptualizing broad influences on political orientation or activity, but they depend heavily on survey research, often center around schools and families, and do not engage politically extreme populations.

Radicalization research may provide a useful bracketing of political socialization's focus on family, schools, and immediate political context. One would think the political radicalization research has theoretical and conceptual ties to political socialization research, but they are relatively siloed from each other. Radicalization research is more focused on group interactions and identifications. This scholarship views family and schools as separate social spheres with influence insofar as they can prevent total alienation of an individual (Brown 2021; Gidron and Hall 2020; McCauley and Moskalenko 2008; Smith et al. 2020). This focus on social processes is still useful for theorizing the formation and perpetuation of political commitments. For example, McCloskey and Moskalenko's twelve mechanisms of radicalization (2008) describe several types of personal entanglements in political groups that can be major routes to political violence. In the digital environment, the "echo chamber" idea is particularly powerful in explaining how the internet facilitates access to groups and self-affirming ideological messaging (Behr et al. 2013), nudging users towards "accepting that their own thinking is structured in socially dangerous or hateful ways" (Alfano et al. 2018). These transformations in flows of

information and group participation cannot be ignored in a modern analysis of political socialization.

I discuss these fields because both provide valuable but incomplete insights into the question of radical childhood. Political socialization research contains several useful constructs for a framework of radical childhood, such as life course, identity formation, political participation, affect, and legitimization. Radicalization research provides a more comprehensive treatment of the internet as a socializing agent and of politics as an identity. Neither accounts for, in detail, families that are situated far outside of political and/or ideological norms, or for politics as a personal, lived experience. Together, however, they point towards political becoming as a cumulative process where experiences and attitudes interact across the life course. Thus, I ultimately aimed to explore the child of the left radical family vis-à-vis itself, as a motivated and feeling political subject.

2.2 Making of the Political Self

Currently, there is an inscribed set of acceptable political possibilities. However, the work of activists and people otherwise against the system is to articulate new possibilities in and against existing discursive frames and practices (Greenberg 2014; Graeber 2007; Rasza 2015). I acknowledge that the labels “far” or “radical” left are inherently “shaped by discursive practices that portray responses to the world in a form of cultural critique control led by those with the greatest opportunity and power to impose their worldviews” (Nagata 2001). The categorization of an individual’s world vision as within or beyond “normal” political imagination is never value-neutral (Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins 2009) and is often based on a false sense of political inevitability. Thus, I clarify that I use the words “far” and “radical” in the sense that they existentially challenge major institutions in their current form. I do not use these words as a

method of moral assessment, since “one person’s terrorist could be another’s freedom fighter” (Kurt 2023).

In thinking about the political self, I follow a vision of contemporary American anthropology as “post-paradigmatic”, or “linking individual facets of large-scale theories, topics, and methods to particular but not entirely local objects of study” (Knauff 2006). The subject of this study, adult children of radical leftists in the United States, implicates several layers of social life that are not easily connected under one theory. I start with Crossley’s radical habitus, which covers layers of practice, transmission, and social position, and expand to other objects of analysis which radical habitus may not address.

2.3 Radical Habitus

Bourdieu’s habitus is a set of class-based “durable dispositions” towards unconsciously acting and thinking a certain way in everyday life. Habitus is essential to Bourdieu’s theory of practice, which seeks to explain how daily practices are reproduced across individuals in the same social position. Bourdieu depicts this reproduction process as tightly recursive in that it can only be explained by history: “habitus produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action” (Bourdieu 1990, 54) In short, it is “embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history” (56). Habitus, according to Bourdieu, is both dependent on and produces practice alongside “capital” and “field”, which are sets of relationships to power and to other individuals, organizations, and objects. Individuals have access to varying levels of social and cultural capital which facilitate their socialization into corresponding practices.

Similarly, habitus is “a feel for the game”, while the field is the “game”, the relational setting in which habitus directs individuals to act certain ways according to their position.

Nick Crossley (2003) critiques Bourdieu’s theory of practice for erroneously assuming circular reproduction of practices with few accommodations for periods of crisis. Crisis for Bourdieu was a period in which previously learned dispositions no longer supported social survival, suspending participants’ “belief in the game” and leaving room for critical discourse. Crossley argues, however, that critical discourse occurs during both stable and crisis periods through the enactment of “radical habitus”: “Participation in protest events or movements, whatever unrelated contingencies bring it about in the first instance, often creates a disposition towards further political activism; a ‘radical’ habitus” (50). Crisis not only gives rise to protest and critique but forges a durable disposition towards protest that creates continuity between crises.

Crossley’s focus is on New Wave protest movements, but radical habitus has some applications to the question at hand. First, radical habitus in conjunction with Bourdieu’s capital and field are one way to explain intergenerational participation in activism within families, as occurred in many recollections contained in *Red Diapers*. Second, the relationship between radical habitus, historicity, and crisis is a useful one in the current American political climate. Both current crises and memories of previous ones may find special relevance in the thoughts and actions of children of radicals. Third, this study partially derives its novelty from the fact that communist, socialist, and anarchist social movements have changed their shape drastically since the last vocal cohort of “red diaper babies”. Parents who were more recently engaged in far-left movement politics may have inherited and transmitted a different set of skills and critiques, which are worth articulating. Finally, I posit that not all radical habituses are created by or entail

participation in protest. Counter-hegemonic orientations may sometimes exist only on the level of cognition, or may be brought about solely by material conditions. Notably, Mashuq Kurt in his ethnography of radicalized children in Kurdistan (2023) finds that radical action is a “gradual, processual reaction to the political violence and circumstances in the immediate environment” rather than an artifact of previous actions. It has been suggested that emotions are a kind of practice which can be socialized (Scheer 2012), meaning that a radical habitus may also involve the adoption of emotional orientations.

Bourdieu’s habitus is often seen as rejecting discourse as being unimportant and predictable based on people’s social positions. Several scholars have rejected his theory on the basis of this determinism (Rancière 2010; Archer 2007). While Crossley addresses this by including socially-situated “reflexive schemas” in his theory, I believe it does not fully account for several other interesting elements of the research question. Specifically, radical habitus is a useful model for explaining social reproduction of practices, but it does not provide a framework for the agentic inner life. Bourdieu himself says that “political subversion presupposes cognitive subversion, a conversion of the vision of the world” (Bourdieu et al. 2009, 127). How might “visions of the world” be converted or otherwise altered through an individual’s self-reflection and will? Researchers have extended habitus in several directions to this end, including Sherry Ortner’s “serious games” (2006), Didier Fassin’s moral economies (2009), and Sara Mahmood’s moral self-formation (2012). For the purpose of this exploratory study, I employ an approach to political subjectivity focusing on the ideas of orientations and atmospheres, which straddle the tension between agency and determinism.

2.4 Political Subjectivity

Foucault made one of the most well-known claims that subjectivity is inherently political. His “subject” was a double entendre implying someone who is both “subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (Foucault 1982, 781). In his formulation, those who practice power can “attach individual[s] to their own identity, imposing a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him” (781). Althusser had earlier described a similar process through the lens of the state, where ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) such as schools and churches inculcate individuals with ideology such that they cannot imagine practicing anything else (Althusser 1972, 167). While foundational insights on power and subjective life, anthropologists interested in the relationship between the political and the personal have recently gravitated towards person-centered definitions of political subjectivity that are “not reducible to a disciplining, discursive system of power” (Strauss and Quinn 1992). I take the definition put forward by Sadeq Rahimi in his study of schizophrenia, which posits that “the human psyche is fundamentally structured, and that the structure is informed by a ‘symbolic order,’ a system of symbols the units of which always function as signifiers, and the organization of which is closely tied to language” (Rahimi 2015). His definition both provides structure to the unconscious habitus and integrates several notions into the same system: for example, ideology, memory, and language. His formulation evokes observations of the link between sociocognitive processes and ideological discourse (Van Dijk 2000). Like Foucault, Rahimi sees the subject as inherently political, but highlights agency:

Here the subject is conceived of as political in its very subjectivity— both in the sense that it engages in an ongoing act of subjugating and conjugating the world into meaningful patterns and in the sense that the subject is continuously subjugated or conjugated by the local meaning system. Politicality, in this sense,

is not an added aspect of the subject, but indeed the mode of being of the subject, that is, precisely what the subject is. (2015, 8)

Jenkins deconstructs the relationship between culture, subjectivity, and power into “orientation” and “atmosphere”. Orientation is “intentional directionality in terms of value and desire”, while atmosphere is the “socioemotional space in which that orientation takes place in terms of power and position” (Jenkins 2025). Both are affectively charged. In this framework, orientation creates embodied responses to one’s atmosphere, which is the generated context that infuses symbols with immediate, palpable significance. Identity, empathy, emotion, and power dynamics reside in these oriented responses, revealing meanings ascribed to symbols and their contexts. Including such experiential immediacy both entails a richer analysis and does more justice to the people I interviewed, who showed intense (and justified) emotional investment in the topics we discussed. In this way, I integrate meso-level theories of cultural reproduction with a symbolic and affective understanding of the political subject.

2.5 History and Crisis

On top of America’s historical lean to the right relative to other developed countries, the neoliberal turn of the 1970s and the fall of communist regimes in the 80s and 90s have legitimized a cultural and psychological orientation away from alternative ideologies or economic modes in what has been called “the end of history” (Fukuyama 2006) or the “post-political era” (Mouffe 2011). Frederic Jameson (famously quoted by Mark Fisher) simply wrote that “it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Fisher 2009). Fischer described this sentiment as populating a “pervasive atmosphere” in modern Western societies that “constrains thoughts and actions” on a mass scale. Capitalism has created its own historical narrative of inevitability in the minds of average people, resulting in post-political, individualist consumer subjectivities (Bettache 2025; Bauman 1998).

There is also a perspective on the current American moment as crisis. Lauren Berlant in her book *Cruel Optimism* wrote that “The contemporary filtered or mediated political sphere in the United States transmits news 24/7 from a new ordinary created by crisis, in which life seems reduced to discussions about tactics for survival and who is to blame” (Berlant 2011 225). This is evident in the US’s constant military actions, political gridlock, boom-and-bust market cycles, and worsening inequality (Masco 2017). Under the normalization of capitalism, individuals are forced to bear this precarity as a never-ending normal—an “ordinary crisis”.

Political history provides precedent in moments of crisis (Goddard 2006), and such memories are often transmitted generationally. Political memory is related but fundamentally different from value-norms, which “do not, as ideas once did, resemble fixed stars, but rather balloons kept on hand to be inflated when called for, especially on festive occasions” (Luhmann 1997). Political memory has understated importance in the discussion of political transmission, but stems as far back as Karl Mannheim’s first discussion of sociological generations (1970). Mannheim defined generations as cohorts who had undergone the same historical stimuli. He added that transmission of knowledge and ideas is complicated by the fact that young people, when encountering accumulated knowledge for the first time, interpret it from a different distance and lens than their parents, creating variations in the way they appropriate knowledge. These “fresh contacts”, when made in young age, may also form primary experiences or worldviews which children uses as a basis for comparison with future ideological encounters. Several researchers have built upon this idea that historical context is developmentally important, and therefore important for transmission (Foner et al. 1972; Riley 1987, 1973; Elder 2018, 1977). Many of these treatments of the concept, like the rest of political socialization research, focus on value orientations. However, the growing field of memory studies highlights the idea that when a

parent recounts a political experience to a child, it is also historical memory being transmitted and reconfigured in the child's mind (Corning and Schuman 2015). Since historical memory inherently contains political meaning and political symbols, it is as powerful a force of socialization as moral teachings.

A focus on symbolic political memory and its generational dimension enhances my previous discussion on how habitus and symbolic structures are historically situated. Given the dominance of neoliberalism and its corresponding crises, how might young people draw on memory to make sense of their present and future? In addition, many groups are organized online and lubricated by the sharing of political memes, which are themselves references to past political symbols and narratives. In a society that is constantly arguing particular versions of political history, what does it mean to hear alternative versions? To internalize or find contradictions in them? And how do these memories intersect with existing practices, skills, and emotions to create a lived experience?

3. Methods

3.1 Procedure

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted from November 2025 to January 2026. Recruitment material noted requirements that participants be “aged 18-34, born in the US, and have at least one parent who identifies as socialist, communist, or anarchist”. Due to the difficulty of locating individuals who met the study criteria, initial recruitment efforts leveraged several settings including university departments, activist groups, and online communities (eg. Reddit forums). Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and were held via online video conferencing software, except for one participant who wished to speak in person. The interview protocol addressed participants' childhood experiences of their parents' politics, their current political

identities and practices, and their navigation of relationships and institutions outside the family. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. This study was approved by the Temple University Institutional Review Board. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent and transcribed using aTrain, an offline transcription software. Transcripts were manually cleaned after being generated. After reading through each interview several times, a codebook was assembled consisting of both inductive (from the text) and deductive (from theory) codes (O'Reilly and Kiyimba 2015). While coding, notes were taken on how inductive and theory codes intersected, and short profiles of each interviewee were constructed with reference to theory.

This study approaches the interview as a co-constructed social product in which interviewer and interviewee are “for the most part, interrogating each other” (Mintz 1979). Atkinson and Silverman (1997) suggested that the manufactured selves brought to an interview use a particular style of life narration that they term the “interview society”. They argue that because the interview or confessional involves several layers of invention between interlocutors, the interview must be read as a historical product rather than a reflection of absolute truth. Following this, I approached my interviews as creating conditions for participants to “manage their lives through narrative” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995) and analysis as attending to “social resources, judgments and tools used to ‘make society’ as interviewees attempt to make sense of their place within it” (Baker et al. 2012). The interview protocol had room for follow-up questions, and when interviewing I tried to leave as much room as time allowed for participants to reflect, reconsider, and structure their stories according to their own meanings. As a solo interviewer and a member of my study population, I also had a specific self I brought to

interviews and analysis. Given the conditions of distrust and witchhunting bubbling in the US, it was important for me to make clear at all stages that I was conducting this study as 1) a student unaffiliated with the government, and 2) someone interested in the experience of left political childhood itself, rather than any editorializing that could be done with such a topic. I tried to keep a conversational tone with interviewees, reflecting my own experiences or agreement when I felt it would encourage further engagement with the topic at hand. My precise political opinions are not necessary for this discussion, but the fact that I agreed with many of my interviewees' views made analysis somewhat difficult. I have done my best to trace my logic here between the dialogues shared with me and the conclusions I drew from them. And of course, having a highly idiosyncratic experience with a leftist parent of my own, I entered the study with some blindspots which I have worked with my advisor to account for.

The limitations of the recruitment period warrant comment. All eventual interviewees found the study through organizations that agreed to post a call for participants online on the researchers' behalf. One anarchist organization referred the majority of interviewees. This is a likely reason for the sample consisting solely of white individuals from the American Northeast and Pacific Northwest. It is also likely that there are other individuals who received the invitation and met the criteria who did not feel comfortable being interviewed about this topic. As a result, the analysis focuses heavily on patterns within the interviewees' self-narratives and what they reveal about the potential of political childhoods, rather than making a claim about leftist political childhood as it actually existed for all people who had one. As even a short overview shows ("Participant Profiles" section), the eight interviewees had a variety of relationships with politics, their families, and themselves as political agents.

3.2 Participant Profiles

Noelle (she/her, early 30s) is a public school art teacher and union organizer who grew up with a unionist father and a social-democratic mother. She grew up in Canada, but was linked to American politics through her father, who fled the Vietnam War draft. Noelle described her family as a “social justice family” in the same way that “other families are soccer families”. Her childhood, which she “recalls with a lot of fondness” was marked by attending various protests and events her parents were involved in organizing. Noelle said she identifies as a Marxist.

Darren (he/him, early 20s) is a software engineer who was raised by his father, a politically inactive anarchist. Darren’s political education was mixed, as he spent a significant amount of time with his conservative relatives. Darren’s relationship with his father was strained for years due to his father’s anger issues, which have recently improved. Darren said he has since forgiven his father. Politically, Darren said he “used to think conforming would be okay” but became more radical after doing online research in the wake of the 2024 election. He called himself an “anarchist in the sense that I think that the current government that we have should not exist the way it is”.

Sawyer (they/them, late 20s) is a grocery store worker who had run away from their mother as a teen to live with their father, who was an anarchist biker and tattoo artist. Sawyer described their father as very active in their small community; he organized fundraisers, ran clothing and food drives, and overall “made sure people had access to joy, to food, to their needs”. When Sawyer was 20 years old, their father died in a motorcycle accident. Sawyer said their childhood encounters with law enforcement gave them an “inherent distrust in authority”, and said they wished they could have learned more about their father’s political beliefs before his passing. Sawyer said they “lean anarchist”.

Tanya (she/her, mid-20s) is a record store worker and “ceasefire baby” from a Marxist and Irish Republican family. Tanya grew up with family and friends who had Troubles-related mental illness, as well as persistent conversation about the Troubles and other imperialist conflict. Her relationship with her parents was strained due to their mental illnesses, but she said it has made a “one-eighty”: “you gotta go through some shit to actually come together”. Tanya has a strong Irish and ceasefire baby identity; she identifies as an Irish Republican.

Mel (they/them, 20s) is a tarot card reader and political educator. Mel said they had a complicated relationship with their parents: “there were really good things about what they did, but like also, they were like two neurodivergent working class people trying to make things work and it was not great sometimes”. Mel’s father is a unionist, and their family boycotted stores and media associated with anti-union efforts. Mel had attended music school, then a graduate program in engineering, before starting their tarot card business. They described themselves as an anarchist: “I’m very much not interested in the state or anybody exerting power over anyone else”.

Casey (they/them, mid-20s) is a data analyst who described their father’s politics as being a collection of beliefs considered leftist in the US but not in his native country of England, such as free healthcare and progressive taxes. Casey’s mother is a political independent, and their father was often emotionally absent due to his alcoholism. Casey spent their early education in Catholic school, which they felt “opened their eyes” to hypocrisy in the Catholic Church. Casey said they “go back and forth between socialism and communism”.

Jamie (she/they, early 30s) is an occupational therapist whose single mother “constantly denigrated [the] establishment”. Jamie remembers herself as being codependent with her mother (“it was just us”) and was often upset by her mother being a “pushover” for romantic partners.

Jamie was a high performer in secondary school, which she said led to a period of “reactionary conservatism” in college where she felt alienated from her wealthy liberal peers. After going to occupational therapy school, witnessing her mother navigate disability services, and viewing leftist social media content with her partner, Jamie became more critical of institutions. Jamie identified as someone with “progressive leftist beliefs”.

Paige (she/her, mid-20s) is a policy advocate and political educator from a multi-generational family of Jewish activists. Her mother is an orthodox Marxist, and her father is a Democrat who raised money for the Irish Republican Army. Paige was raised with a strong working-class identity and historical materialist perspective, leading her to pursue higher education in international development. She said that the depth of her political education and experiences in public school helped her become a better communicator. Paige said she identified as a “communist or Marxist”.

4. Analysis

4.1 Family Socialization

4.1.1 Radical Habitus

Social activism is a field that comes with its own prerequisite skills, conventions, and attitudes; these dispositions can be transmitted through the family. Like other habituses, a radical habitus encourages further engagement with social arenas where specific dispositions are advantageous. Noelle’s story might be a quintessential example. After growing up and watching her parents organize their workplaces and the streets, Noelle became involved in the Quebec student movement, where she adopted a “schooled” approach to organizing. She now sees herself as taking the role of “the hype person” in activities at her local and national teacher’s unions. Witnessing, participating in, and finding value in political activism all of her life, Noelle had

inherited considerable political know-how from her family that enabled her to develop her own political identity and priorities. In our discussion, Noelle adeptly compared her organizing style to that of her parents' as "direct democracy" and "union-based" versus "Saul Alinsky-70s community coalition-building", showing her fluency in the language of political organizing. She also attributed her embrace of several organizing principles to her parents' activities; for example, that one should not be overly attached to a single organization or to electoral politics. These pieces of cultural capital allow Noelle to navigate the field of political organizing in a way that the uninitiated would find it difficult to.

Non-practical aspects of habitus can also support adult involvement in activism. Noelle's positive relationship with her parents and their activities allowed her to take up their cognitive schemas of social analysis and a disposition towards the possibility of change. Noelle remembers her parents as being emotionally present and involved in their children's lives in ways other than political education, creating an environment where Noelle felt comfortable listening and learning from them. Actions that Noelle attended with her parents were accompanied by explanations that helped her organize the world; after visiting picket lines, Noelle said her family would discuss how "these telephone workers just want to feed their family...the big boss has money, he doesn't care". Noelle received verbal explanations that referred to specific, "concrete" examples that the family had seen or experienced. These organizations of symbols (workers vs. the big boss, etc.) both encouraged Noelle to pursue activism in adulthood and maintained their explanatory power throughout her future experiences. Noelle's parents had also supported her disposition, practical and emotional, towards hope, which also facilitated her move to activism and her current self-perception as a "hype-person". She said, "It was always like, we're going to get the songbook...we're part of fighting for the solution. That's why activism has brought joy to my

life.” Noelle had inherited a set of practical skills, cognitive schemas, and emotional orientations that, in combination, enabled and encouraged her to be an activist in adulthood—a complete radical habitus as described by Crossley (2003).

Habitus provides a “sense of one’s place”—a subconscious formulation of who one is and where they belong (Bourdieu 1984, 466). These formulations can be positions of critique. Paige had many similar experiences to Noelle, with a mostly supportive, highly activist, working-class family. Paige described several experiences where her parents had directly or indirectly instilled in her a sense of who she was. One example was not being allowed to join organized sports in grade school “because that would, like, encourage identification with a subgroup instead of the working class people”. Paige described letter-writing to George W. Bush as a part of her political education, partially because of the skill involved but also because her mother used the automated replies as a lesson to find political power in oneself rather than politicians. One anecdote Paige told with brevity was the following:

I like, came out as bisexual, I remember like my mom's like reading a newspaper and did not look up and was like, well, just like don't let that distract you from like the, your like, primary identity as a member of the working class and I was like, okay cool. Then, like coming back and she was like, oh but of course we're very supportive and like maybe I should have led differently like...but I was like, it's fine, like I get it.

In the same way a parent might tell their child not to buy certain clothes at the store, saying it’s “not for us”, Paige’s parents gave her a sense of “who she was”—a working-class person who could love who they wanted but could not vote bad things out of existence. This last anecdote especially highlights how Paige was encouraged to conceive of herself as a working-class person before anything else. In Paige’s family, this working-class identity contained a

critique of power (eg. of establishment politicians), orienting her towards particular social and political practices and away from others.

Activism is a specific configuration of political practice, and individuals can be socialized into dispositions that are radical but not “activist” in the way it is commonly understood. Mel emphasized that their family never used “political” language to explain their boycotts but rather made value judgements about what is right or wrong to do to others. Mel explained that when their father went months without pay after rejecting non-union work, he had done it because “it was not the right to do by his other union members... It was just like, this[turning down the job] is the right thing to do”.

High-stakes gestures like these communicate strong messages about which values are most important. By standing with the union under pressure and respecting Mel’s personal decisions, Mel’s parents modeled and vocalized the values of agency and solidarity. When I asked Mel about their values, they said “loving all the people around me in a way that centers their agency...values are going to conflict and the work of living is finding ways to seek the balance”. These values drive many of Mel’s beliefs and actions. Having witnessed a trusted person model “walking away from something not right for you”, Mel left music school, and then engineering school, due to cultural and value conflicts. Having witnessed their family sacrifice material gain in solidarity with other workers, Mel has value-driven expectations of their peers to do the same:

I've been told I have very high expectations of people politically. You know, just boycott Starbucks guys. It's not that hard... And people will be like, oh no, that's too complicated. That's too hard. I'm like, my dad literally went without pay for three months because—I'm like, [incredulously] it's too hard?

Use of specific language, or linguistic registers, can also be socialized into individuals as moral practice. Mel’s parents, through plain language and their working class status, transmitted

a preference for honest, uncomplicated ways of speaking. For Mel, the value of being unpretentious became bound up with the values of agency and solidarity through their orientation towards practical action. In our conversation, Mel seemed to always be emphasizing the possibilities for action underneath the words of others. For example, as a political organizer, they noted that “in leftist spaces, if you don't say the right things, then it's a problem”. Instead of policing language, Mel focused on the opportunity to build connections: “There's going to be people who aren't going to say the right things...[we] figure out, are you actually a problem? Or do you not know better? And can we talk to you and like, build rapport and actually build community?”. Conversely, Mel could identify when opportunities were being denied by others despite claims to the contrary:

One of the first things we were told at the start of our [engineering] program is that we essentially don't need any new research in order to be fully powered by renewable energy. It was meant to encourage us to study public speaking while in grad school because researchers need to be advocates for sustainability. But what I saw was that research functions more as busy work keeping advocates distracted from the fact that we already know everything that is needed.

Mel had not only inherited a set of values, but ways of “knowing how” to enact those values in the world that led them towards a specific social and political position. Their disposition towards language and ability to walk away from “prestigious” social positions are evidence of this.

4.1.2 Socialization of Self-Narratives

Politics sometimes becomes an inextricable part of the stories individuals tell about themselves; family socialization can have a role in this. Tanya told me that when she meets people, she “pitches” to them that she “likes movies and is very Irish”. She elaborated that being Irish seeped into “every aspect” of her life, and as we conversed, she told me about how she saw

Irishness as inherently political: “you can’t not be political in Ireland”.¹ Tanya disclosed few outright politically socializing experiences from her parents, but those that did invoked collective Irish identity: “my dad raised me to be pro-Palestinian since the day I was born. Like, I was always taught that those people are the same as you”. “Same as you” referred to the anti-imperialist political orientation inherent in Tanya’s family’s formulation of Irishness, which linked her family history to broader political structures that oppressed peoples around the globe. Through this anti-imperialist lens held by her immediate family and friends in Ireland, Tanya came to understand much of her experience, including her family trauma², as Irish experience. Referring to the mental illness and emotional suppression in her family, Tanya stated, “We are the textbook generational trauma...the reason my trauma looks like this is because of those years of oppression”. “We” again refers to a collective which Tanya belongs to on account of a specific cultural and political position. Perhaps most tellingly, this is how Tanya responded when I asked her “what does being a ceasefire baby mean to you?”:

To me it drives everything. Like, it's the reason I want to be a good neighbor, it's the reason I want to be a good friend, it's the reason I want to be a good family member. It's also like, it's what my ancestors did. It's just like kind of being a good person, to be a social person, to be involved, that's kind of how they got their politics.

Irishness to Tanya is an encompassing ethical mode of being. It is not only a cultural identity but a cognitive and emotional orientation to the world that necessarily includes political formations of exploiter and exploited, and a corresponding desire to be “good” and “involved”.

¹ All identities are political, but Irishness in particular was center of a centuries-long anti-imperialist struggle up until thirty years ago—this is a major component of modern configurations of Irishness (see O’Kelly 2004, Scanlon & Kumar 2019)

² For more on Troubles-related trauma, see Day & Shloim 2021 or Walsh et al. 2025

Working-class identity was also an important source of politics for some interviewees. As mentioned previously, Paige and Noelle's families assigned encompassing meanings to being working-class. Being working-class was to be left behind by big bosses and politicians, and to thus have a responsibility to organize with other working-class people for their own freedom. Sawyer did not mention developing a working-class identity based on familial education, but rather highlighted the experience of social and economic precarity. When I asked Sawyer how they might be different if they had a different family, they said this:

There's a lot of people who have, uh, similar experiences to me. Um, I mean, I mean, like, like, lots of people have, like, split parents. A lot of people grew up, uh, in rented homes. A lot of people, you know, have to get, like, support from the government to, like, eat every month, you know? Um, I just, yeah, I guess I don't really see myself as that different from most other people...If I had grown up in, like, a more stable household that didn't have cops show up, uh, or anything like that, I think maybe I wouldn't think about it as critically or as often or, um, have that, like, inherent distrust of authority.

Sawyer's response did not center on family beliefs or teachings but the experiences that they felt marked them the most. Sawyer experienced the ways institutions had failed them and their community members and came to see themselves as a part of an oppressed collective working hard for their survival. In this statement, they also refuse the individuation of poverty, framing poverty as a feature of a violent system that sends police to unstable families. Through these early experiences, Sawyer came to understand being working class as a condition of "most people", a collective that could and should be fought for: "our working-class heroes have always, like, inspired me, so I try to do everything that I can, uh, if that means educating other people, uh, if that means showing up to actions...I feel like I have to stay moving". Being a good working class person (a "hero"), then, is engaging with one's community to lift their minds and

bodies above the circumstances forced on them. Having assigned this meaning to working-class status, Sawyer is committed to living it continuously as part of their working-class identity.

4.1.3 Affect and Language

Affective and emotional orientations can be socialized as practices or affective reactions. The early experiences with politics that Darren told me about were largely marked by hostility towards figures, parties, or interlocutors. Both his father and his conservative relatives often used hateful language when discussing politics; Darren quoted one relative as saying “basically verbatim, ‘if a person cannot contribute to you, then they can go fuck themselves’”. Darren also described his conservative relatives as being demeaning towards him personally: “As a child, I just wanted people to have food and housing, like, you know, that’s, like, as a child that sounds awesome, and then being around a lot of conservative people, they think you’re a fucking idiot if you think that’s possible, so they just kind of put you down”. Although he did not explicitly state this connection, Darren also used aggressive language and tone when discussing political others (eg. “fuck them[Republicans], they can all die”). These initial experiences also taught Darren to make sharp moral judgements on certain symbols or representations of symbols. Darren stated that being around conservative family helped him “recognize where certain arguments are coming from...they’re saying something stupid because they’re stupid”.

Emotional practices can come to assume moral meanings. For Darren, politics is a sphere saturated with opposition and indignation, where lines need to be drawn and judgements need to be made. When discussing a given figure or concept, Darren often made arguments by associating charged symbols with each other (eg. “I’m pretty sure she[Kamala Harris] was walking around dressed up as a Republican”) and spoke in terms of negative examples even when his point was to describe something he considered morally good. Here I am not making

some reductive argument that Darren is angry because his family was angry. Sara Ahmed speaking on emotional contagion specified that emotion is not “property, as something that one has, and can then pass on, as if what passes on is the same thing” (Ahmed 2014, 10). What was passed on in Darren’s family was rather emotions as a component of moral practice, where intensity of expression is a parameter of moral evaluation. The consistent reference to charged symbols is entwined in this; it is through embodied, impassioned speech and tone that Darren marks his opposition to things that are “evil”, “degenerate”, or “stupid”. This is a way of taking a stance that could be connected in part to the moral practice of Darren’s family members.

The normalization of anger and violence in Tanya’s accounts were also an example of an inherited felt orientation. Emotions also ran high in her family, especially in relation to politics, which was something she embodied throughout our conversation. I noticed she was prone to making qualifications to emotionally charged statements she made. For example: “I think if you're gonna do a peaceful protest, get angrier. You can get really fuckin' angry and inflammatory without being violent.... There’s not enough anger among the communists. But don't be defeatist angry. Like you have so many reasons to do this”. Or, she said about Jean McConville (a woman disappeared by the Irish Republican Army): “she was a tout[snitch], she was a British snitch, fuck her. So like I’m a hypocrite, but at the same time there's a reason I think that and I'm aware of the reason I think this and I'm more pissed about the reason I think she's a tout than I am with me”. Emotions here were again a moral practice—it is not unlikely someone in her family had also previously said “fuck her” about Jean McConville to take a stance—but Tanya also made a point of qualifying her position and turning attention away from the emotion itself. Tanya connected this phenomenon to her upbringing:

I feel like there is a cultural touch to which you kind of bottle everything up and that makes you very insecure. And there is also a rampant narcissism that either

plays into people thinking you were more valid than others or you are intensely less valid than others. But like sometimes it's kind of like a horseshoe theory where you're like, oh my experiences are so independent so therefore I must suck, but you know, oh wow my experiences are so independent so therefore I must be the best person alive. I feel like I went to the I suck category, while like most of my parents generation went to like the I'm awesome category, but like honestly being the I suck category makes you kind of a better person. I'm gonna be real with you. I'm deeply insecure about my values so I'm like oh if I don't have— if I can't over explain them, then they just suck.

Tanya saw her constant reflexivity surrounding moral emotions as a result of the moral-emotional saturation of her environment. When many of the people around her suppressed their emotions or suffered from mental illness, strong emotional gestures had moral weight (“validity”) which were assumed on part of the gesturer and witnesses. Tanya was immersed in this environment and had concluded that justifying one’s values, including moral-emotional gestures, was better than believing one was more justified (“valid”) than they actually were. This unique cultural and familial circumstance led to Tanya’s particular affect of carefully reasoned anger.

Language and ways of speaking carried their own affectual baggage for several interviewees. In fact, almost all of them had at some point distinguished between regular and “intellectual” political language. Interviewees were primed to react to these language modes differently. As previously discussed, Mel had inherited a disposition around “political” language that favored building relationality and positive possibilities rather than policing. Tanya had strongly worded thoughts about the overuse of theoretical language in American leftist spaces (“can we just, like, shut up, can we just stop?”). This was based in her orientation towards “having a demand”, which she had drawn partially from Irish resistance history:

I think too many people are reading Marx and not reading the room... What's the point of being on the street if you're not on the same page?... You're all on the streets without a demand. It's like the Battle of Bogside started because it was the

one-man-one-vote movement. They had a demand and that's how the Republicans started. So it's like they had a demand, they went to war over it. So clearly it works.

Conversely, some other interviewees had previously been inculcated in “intellectual” political language and emphasized its use as an analytical tool. Paige said much of her political education was demonstrative until she was a teenager, at which point her mother suggested she read Marxist theoretical works. Paige appreciated what she saw as the explanatory power of theory; she said her further education in International Development “helped [her] contextualize things, like, why like cities are built the way they are and why inequality is baked into our systems and having like that high level systems level analysis”. As someone already socialized into making formal distinctions between social and class identities, and whose upbringing included many examples of “systems-level analysis”, Paige was less averse to this language as a way to express political desire. This is not to say that Tanya refused to use theoretical language, or that Paige supported a purely intellectual approach to justice, but rather that these interviewees had different embodied reactions towards this language mode.

4.2 Socialization Outside of the Family

4.2.1 Institutions

Interviewees were aware of how institutions attempted to mark them as certain types of subjects and tried to reflect their own motivations and interests against these judgements. Casey described being punished and bullied at Catholic school as a queer and trans student with “macabre” fashion taste. While Casey could have internalized these judgements, they instead came to understand Catholics as hypocritical and left the Church altogether. Casey said this was partially facilitated by the fact that their mother had “already pushed political boundaries in her family” by being a Democrat and “teaching [Casey] about racism and sexism”. More

fundamentally, Casey came to see a wide gap between what the Catholics around her said and what they did:

When I saw politicians or just people in power consistently, I guess, sinning or breaking like a commandment or not doing unto others as he would have others do unto him, um I guess I just started, like it just felt natural for me to live that way. And I think also, you know, growing up as a classic queer person and trans person in a Catholic family, it made me really have to think about why certain people were hated, and how they've been like twisting things in their heads. When somebody's telling me that, like, a gay person is bad but I know deep down that I'm gay, it makes me question whether I should believe anything they say because I'm a good person. I think that was going through my head a lot growing up.

The church and school had attempted to discipline Casey into living a certain moral doctrine and make them a normative subject. But seeing Catholics, especially those in power, sin repeatedly created rupture for Casey. They could not rationalize the power that Catholicism had claimed over them, so they rejected it. This rejection was about power, not about Christianity itself. Casey said they still believe in God and the moral teachings of the Bible but has distanced themselves from the Catholic Church. These experiences had led Casey down a route of self-making different from the one planned for them, but nevertheless developing their ability to locate and critique power.

Individuals sometimes change their perspectives significantly when they recognize unjust logics of power in their lives. Sawyer developed a critical subjectivity in response to disciplinary power exerted on them at work. Sawyer worked at a grocery store during the COVID-19 pandemic and was forced into unsafe situations at risk of losing their job. They noted that their company allowed office workers to work from home while refusing to provide store workers with masks or ensure that customers were behaving safely. If store workers caught COVID, they were not paid for recovery time and had to provide a doctor's note as proof of their status. "My company wasn't gonna do anything to protect us", Sawyer said. "We were their profit...it set in

stone that, like, I'm one of the worker bees. I'm one of the people that society is willing to sacrifice to get sick and possibly disabled or die". Recognizing that their company was minimizing responsibility for its employees and maximizing profits, Sawyer said they became more "radical": "what's happening right now, it[the system]'s not working". The company had marked Sawyer as an expendable worker; Sawyer used this classification as a launching point for their own radical subjectivity and actions.

People can be socialized differently by the same institution; interviewees assigned disparate meanings to the institution of higher education. As previously mentioned, Paige valued her university experience for helping her contextualize her pre-existing beliefs, although, being raised as skeptical of institutions, she believed her education should have been available "outside of the university format". Mel had their own moment of rupture with their engineering program where they felt it was not as committed to fighting climate change as it said it was. Still, Mel had encountered a one-credit class that piqued their interest within their engineering program:

[The classes] were actually run by some really rad activists. Um, and that is first of all, that is what set me solidly on the anarchist path. A lot of what we ended up getting trained in was like, how do you really listen to people? How do you facilitate a meeting? How do you discuss these challenging topics?... That is something that takes skill and that's something that, that really helped me learn.

While the rest of Mel's program directed student activity towards what they felt was "busy work", Mel found themselves transformed by a class that resonated with their pre-existing values. In this marginal space within the university, Mel learned skills that helped them actualize their values and set them on a different path.

Jamie's experience at university demonstrated how several values and emotions, reflected off the structuring power of an institution, can alter subjectivity. She said that being rewarded for high achievement in high school made her view systems as "better than they actually were",

leading her to confer responsibility to the individual. When she entered a university with mostly wealthy, left-leaning students who tended to confer responsibility to institutions, she saw them as “absolutely clueless” and “protesting things that were kind of frivolous”. Furthermore, Jamie felt that her wealthy classmates, who preached equality and anti-racism, were being hypocritical for socially excluding students who weren’t wealthy. At the same time, she was going through a relationship break-up that made her depressed and “shut off from people in general”. Jamie said these factors in combination reinforced a “reactionary conservative” orientation that she had at the time. Feeling excluded at this institution that amplified voices that she already saw as “frivolous” cemented her dislike of these morally saturated discourses claiming justice for all, and her subjectivity at the moment as a lone agent responsible only for herself.

4.2.2 The Internet

All interviewees used the internet as news sources; Darren and Casey (the youngest participants) described thinking significantly differently about the world because of their internet use. Darren attributed most of his political development to his recent time on the internet, which is known to delimit affect and information in its own way (Davis 2018). Because people bring in their own orientations and knowledge when they use the internet, I argue that Darren transposed and reinforced his moral-emotional practices onto his internet use, in the process transforming his conceptualization of politics. Darren sees the internet as both a place to learn and as “full of bullshit” that must be categorized and reacted to as such: “Twitter leftists...are annoying as fuck. There’s liberals who went to BlueSky and [laughs] we’ll move on. And then there’s Republicans slash neo-Nazis who spout straight garbage”. Following examples of issue-based politics in his childhood, Darren drew upon discretized symbols and narratives common on social media. While some interviewees described evaluating presidential candidates based on their support of

the working class, Darren described himself as a “multiple issue voter” and went on to discuss minorities, genocide in Gaza, and the prison system. The stream of political problems itemized on the internet by videos and articles (eg. “videos on the prison system”) culminated in the rupture of Darren’s moral expectations. When he arrived at a systemic critique, it was built on the evidence of many individual examples of wrongdoing: “there is no openness to actually improving the lives of the American people, or anybody outside of just billionaires”.

Casey, who described themselves as having a TikTok addiction, approached the influence of the internet from a different angle narratively: “I think it[current events]’s making me more left-leaning because the only people who seem to be on the side of what I think is morally and ethically right are leftists. And more to that point, the things that they want and the things that they fight for are things that I care about”. Casey went on to discuss how social media like TikTok introduced them to turbulent discourses about current events, such as genocide in Gaza, and how they did their own research on the non-social internet to confirm the claims being made. This research provided the factual basis for Casey’s moral judgements of these situations, and these issues provided the compass by which Casey measured the morality of political discussants. In discussing internet use especially, one must be careful to understand that people can only ever report what they feel is happening; “mostly what people say is the legitimization of what they do, not the explanation or the description” (Baker et al. 2012). I as the interviewer certainly cannot know how much of Casey’s internet use is directed by an algorithm, or which sources Darren actually drew upon to form his opinions. It is clear though from these anecdotes that these individuals use the internet as a morally orienting tool, as a way to formulate explanations of the world that honor their senses of morality. As a result, their explanations often include discourses highlighted online such as the Gaza genocide and identity politics. This

contrasted with some other interviewees who mostly framed the internet as a way to “stay informed” or organize with comrades on Signal. These interviewees, who were older and reported having more ingrained radical politics, referred to the internet more as a tool than as something that could significantly change their minds.

Media exposure is sometimes mediated by close relationships. Jamie said Instagram content introduced to her by an ex-partner was one contributing factor to her eventual shift further left. Initially, during COVID-19, this began as content that made her “think a little bit more about coming to the defense of like, certain Democrats or whatever. And it's like, are they actually doing anything, you know?”. As Jamie went to occupational therapy school, she began to learn about disability activism and “more on the fringes social justice things” like fat liberation. “I kind of was like, well, these people don't need to be taking personal responsibility. Why does anyone else?”, she said. “I think it kind of like brought me to the edge and then I like pulled everything else over that way”. Specific internet discourses facilitated a change in mindset towards systems thinking, which Jamie then used to understand other leftist perspectives. At the time of our interview, Jamie said she did not deliberately seek opposing viewpoints often unless they were more left of her. This intentional commitment shows Jamie’s deliberate adoption of criticism as her preferred orientation to politics.

Interviewees were critical of their information environment and described practices for controlling the impact of media use on their lives. In conjunction with her more systemic perspective, Jamie said she tries to take individual opinions less seriously and “think about, okay, well, what is the actual power?...Maybe I find this person's opinion kind of cringe or whatever, but like, that's not power exercising, you know, nobody in the world needs to worry about the 19 year old on Twitter”. Noelle similarly was less interested in internet debates than in debating

with people she would see again in real life. She said she saw the internet as a way to get a pulse on public opinion, but “did not care that much” about “fucked up takes”, only about where they came from. Noelle’s focus on real-world relationships tempered her susceptibility to emotional internet discourses. Tanya said she tried to calibrate her information diet itself:

If I can see three million headlines about Jeffrey Epstein rather than seeing one headline about Jeffrey Epstein, one about Palestine, one about Venezuela, one about Donald Trump, you know, it's so oversaturated. I can't figure out what's going on. You had so many narratives that it's so convoluted. You can't cope. So it's all about, like, variety for me. Like, having more nuanced, your morals, your beliefs, letting your news find you.

These participants stated their intention to shape and delimit their own subjectivities through internet use. In this way, they are “seeking out the subjective computer” (Turkle 1995, 358) to support the development of their desired selves.

4.3 Political Memory

Family life, education, and media provided resources of varying efficacy for resisting the melting of historical continuity. The resulting political memories, or lack thereof, set discursive terms for activism, affective states, and self-conceptions. This was clear in my conversation with Tanya, who as previously discussed had a strong sense of past and present mediated by her Irish identity. Identity is its own form of political memory: for example, “to be Jewish is to remember that one is such... What is being remembered? In a sense, it is memory itself” (Nora 1989). For Tanya, reviving memories of Irishness gave meaning to her present as the continuation of a legacy. In particular, Tanya drew upon what she saw as an Irish moral orientation towards sociality and “involvement” even in the face of violent oppression. Tanya also drew upon other political memories and overall used history very fluently to articulate (counter)examples to the future she wanted: “U.S. withdrawals, like from Afghanistan, from Libya, from Iraq, from

Iran...reaffirm that there is a real evil and it is American imperialism". For Tanya, American imperialism gives definition to what would otherwise be an amorphous "ordinary crisis".

Naming these events as part of a continuous political process (imperialism) is how Tanya made sense of the present and identifies a launch point for action.

Interviewees with Marxist or unionist parents all had a strong sense of past and present, and articulated the present as belonging to a "continuous political moment", as Noelle put it. The lengths of these periods varied between interviewees; Mel, the child of a unionist, talked about the history of American labor starting with the Haymarket Riots, while Paige said the Holocaust represented cycles of oppression to her multigenerational family of Jewish activists. These individuals had resources to explain their past and present in nonnormative ways that opened the door for analysis and action. Some other interviewees did not have such resources, creating different subjective states. Darren, for example, interacted with history as a series of disappointments, much like his father "lost faith" after serving in the Iraq War and witnessing Obama's presidencies. Darren's point of reference for his internet research was Trump's second election, which "pissed [him] off" and spurred him to look at history to "figure out why this happened". History in this case serves the role of explanation for a present-day disappointment.

Although all interviewees pointed to the present as an unusually cruel time in recent American history, they configured crisis in different affectual directions. Sawyer, who is involved in direct actions, described the current moment as an active struggle: "I'm not, we're not in that world where I can choose what's happening right now. I just see what's happening is not working, and right now we're at the step of taking that down, or fighting the system".

Acknowledging the crisis, Sawyer maintains their agency by orienting towards the possibility of taking down the system. Conversely, Jamie, who moved to a remote area as part of a travel

contract for work, feels unable to engage with the crisis in such a way: “all the stuff that’s going on in major cities, it’s not going on here... I should know more of what's going on, but I also know that there's no benefit to me not being able to sleep because I'm so angry about ICE”. As a clinical worker, Jamie suffers from compassion fatigue and feels unable to cope with the full scope of crisis. Accordingly, she tries to live her values by focusing on her patients instead.

When I asked Casey if there were events important to their worldview, they said:

Yeah, um I think everything that's happening with ICE, um, Sudan, the Congo, Palestine, Um, COVID, I mean it's still kind of happening. Um there's I guess a recession maybe that we're about to go into um, there was another recession I was too young for, 9/11 was the only historical event that happened in my time. I guess other things happened but I think those are things that have shaped me. Those are the only things that come to my mind right now and it's probably because they're still occurring. I guess you could say they're making me feel a little nihilistic, which I've always been a little bit. Um, but definitely more now stressed. I feel like the topic of leaving the country has been brought up a lot more.

Casey’s encounters with political history from before their lifetime were from history classes, sought out on the internet, or isolated comments from their father. Thus, the meaning of historical sequence for Casey lied in the patterns between separate events, such as parallels between the Nazi Secret Service and ICE in the US. These were not parallels that supported Casey’s agency, though: “when police are breaking the laws, you can’t do much”. Lacking other emotional orientations towards these events, such as the faith of an activist, Casey understood the crisis as morally overwhelming. As evidenced by their initial response—a laundry list of contemporary atrocities—the present was a never-ending state of precarity, creating feelings of stress. Without a way to morally disengage from crisis, Casey felt the enormity of current events foreclosing the possibility of anything else.

5. Discussion

“Oh, Kinderland,
 Land of my childhood summers,
 You shall never know
 The clack of fascist hoofs,
 The growl of fascist beasts.

Only the voices of happy children singing,
 Of children’s dancing feet,
 Of childhood dreams and fancies,
 Shall you know.”

“Oath of a Kinderland Camper”, Edith Segal³ 1942

Camp Kinderland is one of the few surviving leftist summer camps from the heyday of communism in the United States.⁴ This poem that a former campgoer shared with me demonstrates how politics can be construed in different ways subjectively. Politics on one hand can be a space for joy when one creates the world they desire, connection when relating with family and friends, and skill when one takes up difficult practices to assert their own interests. Politics is also a sphere of intense disappointment, risk, disagreement, and helplessness, especially when fascists begin to march down the street. In developing their political selves, these interviewees did not merely figure out their opinions on tax policy or abortion but assumed

³ Edith Segal (November 11, 1902 – 1997) was a Jewish-American choreographer, dancer, poet and songwriter. She was a dance teacher for several decades at Camp Kinderland. For more on Segal, see the Edith Segal Papers at the Dance Collection of the New York Public Library Archives.

⁴ Camp Kinderland is also a major subject in Paul Mishler’s *Raising Reds: The Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States* (1999).

power as a central analytical lens for understanding themselves and their environments.

Throughout their lives, the cultural resources passed down to them by their parents continued to influence the ways they approached new situations. At the same time, the process of growing up created new opportunities for these participants to discover new orientations or practices on their own. These paths make the difference between determination and despair in the face of crisis.

This study has extended the concept of radical habitus beyond its original formulation as a set of durable dispositions adopted through activism. My findings suggest that radical habitus can also operate as practices and perspectives transmitted through family life, even in the absence of sustained activist practice. These practices, while affecting how individuals engage with politics, can be related to language, affect, and narratives of self without involving activism. Thus, a politically radical habitus is not only initiated by prior activism but other elements of personal history, such as family environment. This aligns more closely with Bourdieu's broad description of habitus as "embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history" (1990, 54). Also consistent with Bourdieu's original habitus, some of the political practices described had correlates of social position (eg. class). This was especially evident when families brought explicit awareness to their social position as a method of political consciousness-raising, an intervention likely less common in non-radical families.

Simultaneously, this study has shown the usefulness of a subjective approach to political socialization, integrating life-course perspective with a focus on specific political meanings and how they arise from life experience. Jenkins (2025) has identified the "[acquisition] of subjective awareness of social power and position" as an analytical gap in the study of political subjectivity. Using her framework of subjectivity as orientation and atmosphere, I have elaborated on a few ways the interviewees reported developing their approaches to social power. In this study, the

concept of orientation helpfully avoided determinism while accurately describing the primacy of pre-existing perspectives and interpretations. Some participants held orientations that accurately and comfortably explained their worlds for their entire lives. Others reoriented in response to a perceived shift in their environment (atmosphere). In this way, orientation encompasses the understanding of power and inequality, sometimes as reified objects and other times as a man-made system.

Social and political instability can alter individual subjectivities in marked ways. This study has shown a few examples of how personal and historical resources are activated during crisis moments to create new orientations compatible with unstable meaning systems. Historical resources were analyzed in regards to their representations; speaking of an event as a disappointment is different from speaking of it as an act of aggression or a systemic injustice. The life course perspective was also useful to this analysis. The oldest participants had their formative years shaped by Iraq War and the 2008 recession, while younger participants had their formative years shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. These within-lifetime historical contexts were important testing grounds for belief systems and contributed to budding senses or articulations of injustice. Mental representations of these events also sometimes changed across the lifespan because of changes in worldview or, indeed, because of ongoing crisis. Accounting for historical memory and the life course perspective gave a richer understanding of how individuals had come to interpret their political present.

Despite the various following limitations of the study, it is hoped that the evidence has been arranged in a way that makes the findings clear. The inclusion of an interviewee in one section but not another does not indicate that they did not discuss the second topic, nor does it mean that they provided unhelpful testimony. The process of analysis necessarily and

unfortunately entailed flattening many deeply personal insights in order to keep the analysis coherent. It is hoped that the richness of the interviewees' experiences comes through regardless. The homogeneity of the sample has been noted previously. While the sample is thankfully diverse in terms of class origin, parental ethnic and national origin are likely large influences on the ways political orientations are passed down and how children come to see themselves. In addition, despite best efforts, interviewees in this sample all identified as being on the political left. These interviewees were likely the most generous and left-sympathetic of the potential participants who saw recruitment materials. The perspective of a conservative or moderate child of leftists would have been invaluable. In some ways, sample homogeneity is a reflection of a polarized, high-stakes political environment; in other ways, this is a common limitation of undergraduate research projects.

As Rahimi (2015) argues, subjectivity is always political because it is continuously conjugated by local meaning systems. The participants in this study appeared to recognize this politicality, rather than fully denying the present or imagining the self as wholly separate from social forces. This awareness can enable deliberate political action, but it can also produce feelings of overwhelm, anger, or helplessness. In particular, political crisis seems to intensify the urgency of political commitments while also exposing the limits of what individuals can actually control. Future work should address the limitations discussed as well as explore other subjective understandings of power and inequality that may not be so directly identifiable. Most of the participants encountered very specific American cultural formulations and institutions, and entered crisis with at least some understanding of their own politicality. The formation of political subjectivity likely looks very different for individuals without these personal histories. In addition, since the theoretical approaches used here share a common concern with the

difference between what is transmitted and what is acted, ethnographic work is likely necessary to tease out the formation of subjectivity as it happens. The analysis of political transmission as a subjective, dynamic process demands methodology that can do it justice.

This project began as an interrogation of the relationship between the personal and the political. Perhaps unsurprisingly, naming politics during one's youth allows them to speak of it in adulthood. But this experience does not acquire the same meaning for everyone, nor is it a guarantee of future politics. Some participants found their political childhoods joyful and foundational, while others reinterpreted their pasts in light of new information. In some ways, this project speaks to the primacy of the present as a cumulative result of the past. All of the interviewees were equally or more proud of the distance they had traveled than they were of the places they came from. The self of the present is the one developing, interpreting, and acting. And yet it is true that when interviewees spoke about emotions felt, conversations had, and political thinking in the same breath, they were simultaneously baring their personal selves and their political selves. For these interviewees, politics lives in bodies, in relationships, and in the stories they tell about who they are and where they came from. In this way political childhood is its own personal history, something we draw upon as we exercise our agency into the future.

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