

## Introduction

Global social and economic change is rapidly altering people's experience of youth. Widespread unemployment, new health risks, and political conflict are reshaping the social landscape in which children and young people grow up. At the same time, governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the media are centrally concerned with disciplining youth, for example, through the circulation of negative images of young people.

An important achievement of recent human geographic, anthropological, and sociological work has been to show that young people are not passive in the face of these threats to their livelihoods and self-respect; they actively and creatively shape the world around them (e.g., Bucholtz 2002; Katz 2004; Venkatesh and Kassimir 2007). This book builds on this work through considering the lives of thirteen young people living in the United Kingdom, United States, India, Germany, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. These people include nine men and four women, all but one of whom is aged between sixteen and thirty. The book examines the active ways in which these young people are responding to economic, political, and social threats. *Telling Young Lives* offers a comparative understanding of how people's experience of youth is changing and how they contest their marginalization in the political sphere.

The book is innovative in its use of individual vignettes, or "portraits," to uncover issues of youth and political change. In each of the chapters that follow, scholars use the life of a single young person to cast light on broader

youth issues. We do not regard the individual as providing an unproblematic window on processes of change. Contributors do not provide “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1973), if this means adhering to the idea that a single person or scene is a microcosm of broader dynamics. Nor do scholars in this volume subscribe to the classically modern notion of a heroic individual carving out their own world (see Butler 1990). Rather, contributors share with other scholars an interest in how single lives may “reveal insights not just into the experiences and attitudes of the individuals directly concerned, but also of the wider society or social segment of which they are also part” (Arnold and Blackburn 2005: 43). To a greater extent than many other styles of scholarly writing, individual vignettes can illustrate how processes cohere to produce human outcomes, convey the textured experience of youth, and instill in readers empathy, respect, and understanding.

Our focus on narratives also reflects our interest in forms of knowledge production that depart from the standard journal article or book chapter. We asked contributors to place a premium on clarity and accessibility in the chapters that follow. The chapters do not include academic citations, specialist terms, or lengthy reviews of scholarly debates. They are written as far as possible through reference to the words, actions, and comportment of individual youth, and they often focus on relatively mundane aspects of young people’s lives (see Philo and Swanson in the Afterword to this book). This emphasis on clarity and young people’s expressive practice arises in part out of a desire to make the book accessible to a broad audience. But it also reflects an appreciation of the contribution of postcolonial and feminist approaches to knowledge construction and research (e.g., Madison 2005). Scholars in these fields frequently emphasize a need to break down the boundaries between the knowledge of the researcher and that of the researched (e.g., Hofman and Rosing 2007); to develop and recover knowledge that serves to counter oppression (e.g., Sangtin Writers 2006); and to recognize the unequal relationships of authority and privilege that structure all elements of research (Madison 2005). Feminist work is especially attuned to the importance of constant critical reflection on the part of the researcher regarding how one’s position shapes the outcomes of research. Contributors to this volume have been centrally influenced by these approaches to knowledge production, and several of the chapters reflect on issues of reflexivity, authority, and power (see especially Chapter 12 by Gardner).

The portrait approach raises important ethical issues. We should note in this context that all of the contributors obtained the permission of their respondents to write about their lives in accordance with the ethical review

boards or guidelines of their institutions. We have also taken appropriate steps to ensure the safety of the young people featured in this book. With one exception, where the young person asked for his name to be used, authors have not used respondents' real names and have obtained permission to reproduce photographs.

Ethical awareness also implies reflecting on our responsibilities to our informants. These responsibilities relate in part to providing young people with opportunities to influence how they are represented, and many of the contributors to this volume have been able to work with their respondents in the production of the portraits. Our responsibilities also involve considering how the process and dissemination of our research might shape political outcomes. Questions of how writing an individual portrait might influence processes on the ground—for example, by broadening popular understanding of marginalization or illustrating opportunities for political change—is a theme that traverses the book.

We also offer portraits of young people mindful of how individual vignettes of contemporary youth are being used by powerful institutions to support particular political agendas.<sup>1</sup> The World Bank's World Development Report (WDR) for 2007 begins with three vignettes of young people, which are used to bolster the arguments of the report. Distinct from these organizations, contributors to this volume refer to the politics of representation and, to a greater extent than do the World Bank and UNICEF, they foreground links between young people's lives and broader structural inequalities.

Our book also departs from many other social science studies of youth in its commitment to drawing together material from different places along the continuum from "global north" to "global south." The majority of the work published in English on youth focuses on young people in Western Europe, North America, and Australasia. As a result, studies of youth often ignore or unwittingly misrepresent the lives of young people in poorer parts of the world and fail to uncover the connections between youth in different places (Katz 2004; Holt and Holloway 2006; see also Dolby and Rizvi 2008). Against this background, our book highlights surprising similarities and striking contrasts between the strategies of young people living in varied settings. Our focus on marginalized youth provides an especially vivid picture of how social forces combine to shape the lives of individual young people. A focus on the marginalized also provides an important counterpoint to the preoccupation of business interests and the mainstream media with representing and discussing relatively privileged Western youth, who tend to be constructed only as cultural consumers.

The remainder of this introduction outlines some of the key contributions of the book to interdisciplinary and transnational understanding of people's experience of youth and young people's political strategies. We do not attempt to summarize the chapters sequentially, but rather draw out three key themes that traverse the individual portraits, introducing some of the major arguments of each chapter along the way. We begin with a discussion of people's changing experience of youth, continue by considering how youth are being imagined in different contexts, and finally we discuss young people's political engagements.

A danger of writing an introductory overview is that it squashes rich ethnographic accounts into particular boxes; we risk suggesting, for example, that X's portrait of a young person is interesting only because of its contribution to Y theme. We are also aware that many readers of this book are of a similar age to the young people featured in the volume, and that an introductory synthesis may distract from cross-learning opportunities that they find most "telling." The themes identified in this introduction should be envisaged, then, not as a wholesale review but as providing *one* possible set of starting points for comparative reflection and discussion. Chris Philo and Kate Swanson provide important alternative perspectives in the excellent Afterword that they have written for the book.

## Restructuring Youth

Global changes associated with unemployment, economic restructuring, global health risks, militarization, and educational transformation have often fundamentally altered how people negotiate "transitions to adulthood" (e.g., Aitken 2001; Valentine, Skelton, and Chambers 1998; Venkatesh and Kassimir 2007). Several commentators have noted a disappearance or erosion of a phase of adolescence for the poor in parts of Asia and Africa, where rapid economic change and new health threats propel many impoverished children directly into paid work and the demands of adult roles (Verma and Saraswathi 2002; see also Robson 2004; Dolby and Rizvi 2008). Others have shown that a period of youth is being *created* in poorer parts of the world. This point emerges strongly in the first youth portrait of the volume, in which Jane Dyson discusses the life of a sixteen-year-old girl named Saka growing up in a remote part of the Indian Himalayas. Dyson shows that changes in educational and marital practices have resulted in the emergence of a new period of "youth" (*jawaani*) between childhood (*bachpan*), which is perceived to end at puberty, and adulthood (*bare*) when young people are married. Dyson shows how Saka has been

able to use her youth to create distinctive gendered cultures and experiment with new identities, even while her youth remains marked by grueling physical labor.

Dyson's chapter also shows that youth and adulthood are fluid and contested concepts whose meaning and form vary widely over space and time, a theme that has also emerged from recent scholarship on childhood (e.g., Aitken 2001; Prout and James 1997). For men, youth and adulthood are frequently defined in terms of financial independence from parents or senior mentors. But adult masculinities may also be linked to achieving non-economic forms of respect (e.g., Demerath 1999; Willis 1977) or legal and political power (e.g., Bourgois 1995). By contrast, adult femininities are often negotiated through establishing a long-term partnership—typically through marriage—or economic independence from parents. Childbearing, biological maturity, and the acquisition of embodied skills are also important components of definitions of gendered adulthoods in a wide variety of contexts (Cole 2005).

If youth is constituted in part as the absence of adulthood, it is also clear that people associate youth with the presence of certain qualities (see also Arnett 2004). Dependence, irresponsibility, innocence, recalcitrance, and a certain restless energy are characteristics that are commonly attributed to youth in disparate contemporary settings (Bucholtz 2002), although, as we will see, the manner in which young people are defined and define themselves varies greatly through space and time.

Recent studies suggest that global and regional economic and social changes often prolong the period over which people achieve varied forms of adulthood (e.g., Weiss 2002). In a key sense youth is being detached from the biological quality of “being young”. For example, structural adjustment programs in the global south and not dissimilar processes of economic restructuring in Euro-America have delayed or prevented people from acquiring financial independence from their parents and establishing separate economic and familial units. In other situations, neoliberal economic change has prevented young people from acquiring the skills, welfare goods, and social support required to manage a transition to adulthood.

These are themes that emerge strongly in Chapter 3 of this book in which Kristina Gibson describes the life of Blacc, a homeless young man in New York. Gibson identifies periods during which Blacc was able to acquire certain accoutrements of valued “adulthood,” such as an independent home and regular wage. But Gibson also emphasizes Blacc's enduring inability to negotiate a hostile urban environment. In Gibson's work, youth must be understood not as a sequestered stage of relative safety, as it is in

some studies in the global north (see Furlong and Cartmel 1997), but as a prolonged period of vulnerability and hardship.

The extension of youth is also a theme that surfaces in Chapter 4 in Meth's description of Vusi, a young man in his early twenties living in an informal settlement in Durban, South Africa. As a black child growing up in the Apartheid era, Vusi's education was cut short at a young age, and he was compelled to seek work in the informal economy. But, even though Vusi's transition to adulthood was in certain respects accelerated, he was also unwilling or unable to acquire many of the trappings of mature adulthood. Approaching his mid-twenties in 2005, Vusi continued to move between insecure, poorly paid jobs in the informal economy.

The picture emerging from Dyson's, Gibson's, and Meth's chapters, and those of several other chapters in this volume, is of youth as a complicated terrain of semi-autonomy in which "adult" social goods are often elusive. Young people frequently experience the acquisition of particular forms of adulthood as a partial and reversible achievement (e.g., Furlong and Cartmel 1997), and they often move back and forth between activities understood locally as "youthful" and those imagined as "adult."

## Imagining Youth

Ironically, as young people are finding it more difficult in many places to acquire valued forms of adulthood, governments and the media often criticize youth for their alleged wayward, rebellious, or apathetic behavior. Of course, negative stereotypes of youth are not new. But the rise of neoliberal economic policies in many parts of the world has often been accompanied by the proliferation of discourses that criticize youth for their actions, often through reference to idealized visions of youth that young people fail to embody (McDowell 2003). Politics is often a strong theme of this negative language. Governments, media, and parents frequently imagine youth as either politically apathetic or extremist, and these discourses have intensified in the early 2000s in response to high-profile forms of youth violence in Western Europe, Latin America, South Asia, and elsewhere (Hansen 1996).

This collection highlights how young people are seeking to negotiate stereotypes of youth. This theme comes out especially powerfully in the chapters on the United Kingdom. In Chapter 5, Linda McDowell argues that depictions of working-class young men as lazy, disengaged, and violent complicate the attempts of the young man at the center of her study, Richard, to find secure work. McDowell points to the strongly gendered charac-

ter of these negative depictions; young men—imagined as inherently errant and irresponsible—are said to be failing in school, spreading violent crime, and incapable of conducting service work. In Chapter 6, Peter Hopkins builds on research in Glasgow, Scotland, to demonstrate that Muslim young men of South Asian origin may suffer even more acutely from stereotypical constructions of youth in contemporary Britain. The attacks on America on September 11, 2001, combined with the bombs planted in London in July 2004 has generated a climate in which suspicion of young men in general has fused with racial and religious prejudices. The young men at the center of McDowell's and Hopkins's chapters are keenly aware of broader negative discourses and actively tried to contest these stereotypes.

An interrelated but distinct strand of commentary on contemporary youth focuses on questions of individual responsibility and tends to blame youth—at least implicitly—for their economic marginalization (cf, Katz 2004; Ruddick 2003). This strand of thinking is well represented in the World Bank's (2007) World Development Report (WDR), titled *Development and the Next Generation*. Scattered through the WDR are attempts to identify young people's individual responsibilities for their futures. For example, in the executive summary, the WDR quotes a young person in Georgia, "The majority of youth in Georgia now realize that the key factor in finding proper jobs lies in themselves" (World Bank 2007: 15). A few pages later the authors of the report conclude that in addressing the problems faced by contemporary youth, "Public spending alone will not do the trick. Policies must stimulate young people, their parents and their communities to invest in themselves" (World Bank 2007: 21). These statements are linked to the policy goal of offering young people "second chances". It is a short step from such statements to wider public and media discourses that blame young people—including those in the global south—for their poverty, deprivation, and powerlessness. Tellingly absent from the World Bank's report are the issues of power and inequality that mark the lives of the youth discussed in this volume.

In contrast to the authors of the WDR, and in line with much recent writing on children within sociology and geography (see Aitken 2001; Holt and Holloway 2006), contributors to this book situate youth practice with reference to broader structural forces. Horschelmann's portrait (Chapter 7) is based on fieldwork in Eastern Germany and nicely illustrates this strength of the book. Horschelmann describes the contradictory implications of German unification and the decline of state socialism for a young man called Sven, who was in his mid-twenties in 2006 and came from a lower-middle-class family living in Eastern Germany. The decline of state social-

ism has opened up new opportunities for Sven, especially the chance to participate in transnational youth cultures. But the emergence of more market-based social forms had altered the school system such that students are increasingly allocated to classes according to their ability. Moreover, Horschelmann describes how, in the rapidly changing economic scenario in Eastern Germany, even well-qualified students are not guaranteed access to secure and well-paid work. In Chapter 8, Crotty, Moreno, and Aitken expand on this theme in the context of work they have conducted in California. Their study of a working-class young man called Mike shows how neoliberal discourse enjoins young people to live responsible and autonomous lives at precisely the moment at which the removal of educational facilities and health care is undermining possibilities for social mobility. Horschelmann and Crotty, Moreno, and Aitken treat the language of “individual responsibility” not as a transparent reflection of “young people’s point of view” but as an ideology shaping the lives of the young people they study. These authors also show how this ideology is built into the landscapes in which these young people live, play, and learn.

## Political Geographies of Youth

The academic division of labor within geography and related disciplines has militated against sustained reflection on political geographies and anthropologies of youth, a third key theme of this book. Mainstream political geographers have shown minimal interest in young people, despite a recent opening up of this subdiscipline (Philo and Smith 2003). While several political geographies focus on young people, their status as youth and the politics of age and generation are yet to be explicitly addressed. Similarly, anthropologies of youth have tended to focus on social and cultural aspects of young people’s lives to the relative exclusion of discussion of their political strategies and involvement (Bucholtz 2002).

Recent social science studies of young people that have considered youth politics often posit that there has been a transformation in the nature of young people’s political engagements. In this view, there was a marked decline in class- and party-political-based activism among young people after the 1960s: involvement in party politics has decreased (Cloonan and Street 1998), young people are reluctant to vote in elections (Eisner 2004), and political mobilization based upon ideological issues is declining (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). Wallace and Kovatcheva (1998) use research in Europe to claim that all types of “formal” political action have become less common among young people. Mirroring in certain respects



state and media discourses of young people as apathetic, these authors argue that young people are active only in “post-modern forms of protest—symbolic and cultural challenges to the dominant system of rules and regulations and dominant values and assumptions of good taste” (Wallace and Kovatcheva 1998: 262).

Young people in some of the settings described in this book *are* becoming disengaged from formal political action. In Chapter 9, Alex Jeffrey’s portrait of Zilho, a Bosniak man in his mid-twenties living in Brcko, Bosnia, highlights this point. Jeffrey describes how the Serbian occupation of Brcko in 1992 forced Zilho and his family to migrate to areas of the surrounding countryside under Bosniak control. The introduction of international development assistance in Brcko and a cessation of Serbian violence encouraged Zilho to return to his birthplace in the late 1990s. But he returned to a physical urban landscape that had been inscribed with symbols of Serbian power and to a social landscape in which people from Serbian backgrounds monopolized the best jobs. Against this background, Zilho told Jeffrey that his future lay not in organized politics but in the types of incremental and individualized political action that Wallace and Kovatcheva regard as the purview of today’s youth.

The theme of disinvestment in formal political action is also foregrounded in Chapter 10 by Danny Hoffman. Hoffman discusses a young man called Mohammed, who was in his early thirties in 2006 and lived on the edge of the city of Freetown in Sierra Leone with his wife and children. Economic and political insecurities frame Mohammed’s life: the economic collapse of Sierra Leone following the introduction of structural adjustment policies in the 1980s, the proliferation of violence after the end of the Cold War, and the widespread absence of schooling and health facilities. Mohammed had responded to these insecurities, in part, through acting as a mercenary for a wealthy patron. But he was increasingly trying to distance himself from this dangerous work. Hoffman’s chapter highlights young people’s often precarious and shifting relationship to collective forms of organized political action.

While acknowledging how social and economic change may encourage young people to turn their back on politics—also a theme of Meth’s and Nayak’s accounts in this book—we wish to emphasize young people’s deepening engagement in formal political action in many settings. This point often emerges in accounts of young people’s involvement in brokerage work, also a theme of a wider set of youth studies (e.g., Hansen 1996, 2006). For example, in Chapter 11, Craig Jeffrey’s portrait of Suresh, a Dalit (ex-untouchable) politician in north India, points to the emergence of a

generation of low-caste “new politicians” who are creating a rural-urban political nexus that links them to the Indian state. Jeffrey shows that Suresh’s social networking at the local level is intimately linked to the rise of a Dalit political party at the regional level, and thus that party politics remains central to youth politics in north India.

Benjamin Gardner’s portrait (Chapter 12) also offers a telling counterpoint to public and scholarly discourses of youth apathy and political disenchantment. Gardner’s account focuses on a young woman called Nala, who was thirty-six in 2006, but considered to be a youth in Tanzania as a result of her unmarried status. Nala was born in a Masai community characterized by strong patriarchal attitudes. Contravening the wishes of her father, Nala left home to establish an NGO—the Pastoral Women’s Council—committed to improving women’s position in Masai society. Nala has emerged as a key political broker between women in Tanzania and international development organizations in the global north. Gardner also points to how globalization—in this case manifested in Nala’s ability to collaborate with a U.S. NGO and travel to America—has opened up new opportunities and dilemmas for Nala.

These examples of relatively formal and organized political action should not detract from the importance of the politics described by Wallace and Kovatcheva as “post-modern”: everyday forms of protest that are often communicated through young people’s speech, dress, and comportment. The possibility of young people using their everyday actions and cultural styles to critique broader society was a major insight generated by the Birmingham School of Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Hebdige 1979; Willis 1977) and is central to many of the chapters in this book. For example, issues of everyday practice run through Gibson’s study of Blacc’s life. Blacc’s three “rules of the street”—watch out for your friends, don’t appear homeless, and keep moving—all concern the everyday actions required to navigate the hostile political terrain of New York City. These practical tactics are deeply political in the sense of being geared to resisting and escaping dominant structures of power (de Certeau 1984). Nayak’s discussion of a young woman, Helena, in northeast England (Chapter 13) also uncovers the importance of everyday aspects of young people’s behavior—especially their speech, clothing, and demeanor—in processes of social and political change. In this account, Helena was engaged in a “reflexive biographical project of the self” (Nayak in this volume), a type of self-authoring in which she appropriated images of black culture in order to critique the racism and snobbery of some white English youth.

The importance of age and generation in processes of everyday political action is a theme that crosscuts many of the portraits. For example, Crotty, Moreno, and Aitken's chapter emphasizes the significance of Mike's shifting relationship with his brother in the process through which these siblings seek secure futures. Meanwhile, cousins emerge as important in the chapters by Gardner and Meth. Intergenerational politics are an even stronger theme. In several chapters, for example those of McDowell; Meth; and Crotty, Moreno, and Aitken, young people have been compelled to negotiate their teens in the absence of strong parental support, and often have come into conflict with their parents. In other portraits, such as those provided by A. Jeffrey and Dyson, parents have been allies in young people's struggles for security and respect. The complexities of intergenerational politics are brought out especially clearly in Chapter 14 by Skelton concerning a deaf lesbian young woman called Susannah living in the United Kingdom. Deaf themselves, Susannah's parents were strong sources of support and guidance in her early life. But she had increasingly come into conflict with her mother, who strongly disapproved of her coming out as a lesbian. In documenting this conflict, Skelton's chapter points to how intergenerational relations often constitute a social arena in which wider anxieties regarding difference and inequality are played out. She also demonstrates that these intergenerational relationships—frequently enacted within the intimate space of the home—are affected by wider political cultures, for example around sexuality and disability. Read beside the works of C. Jeffrey, Gardner, and Nayak, Skelton's chapter highlights the mutual constitution of formal politics—Politics with a big "P" (Philo and Smith 2003)—and everyday political strategies: politics with a small "p."

Negotiations between formal Politics and everyday politics are grounded in processes of spatial change. Several chapters of this volume describe how the spaces in which young people develop particular life projects are themselves transformed through youth everyday action. For example, Mohammed's work breaking rocks on the edge of Freetown was bound up in the establishment of the urban fringe as a suburb of the city (Chapter 10), and Saka's attempts to subvert gendered norms in the forest reinforced notions of the village as a space in which established notions of femininity should be respected (Chapter 2). As further examples, Blacc's constant movement may act to reinforce stereotypes of urban young men as wandering, errant, and threatening (Chapter 3) just as Nala's restless politicking helps to undermine stereotypes about "women's place in the home" in Tanzania (Chapter 12).

Similarly, processes of spatial change influence the political strategies of young people. The turbulent political violence that has characterized large parts of the Balkans since the early 1990s have markedly shaped Zilho's opportunities to express himself politically (Chapter 9). More positively, the portrait of Suresh suggests how the rise of a political party in India committed to remaking the social landscape to reflect Dalit power has offered ex-untouchable youth opportunities to develop new political cultures (Chapter 11). In both of these chapters, *spatialized networks of practice* are crucial mechanisms for young people to mitigate their exclusion and develop new forms of social mobility. In the youth political geographies offered in this volume, then, space emerges not as a static backdrop or container for young people's strategies, but as something thoroughly imbricated with their political struggles (see Massey 1994, 2005). Read together, the chapters in this book point toward the value of a spatially and culturally sensitive political economy approach to the geographies of young people, one centrally concerned with *grounding* an understanding of youth strategies in everyday and noneveryday processes of change (see Jeffrey et al. 2008).

The chapters in this volume also show that young people's strategies often involve spatial movement and migration, particularly in the context of the speeding up of global communication associated with globalization. For example, in Chapter 12, Nala has used her connections in the United States to expand the work of the NGO that she runs in Tanzania. Many of Zilho's peers in Chapter Nine have been able to make money through establishing small NGOs funded by larger international organizations. In other cases, globalization has encouraged young people to "scale up" their identities by embracing transnational cultural symbols, as Helena and Sven reveal in Chapters 13 and 7 (cf, Hansen 2006). The book therefore underlines not only thematic connections between youth cultural and political strategies, but the manner in which the lives of young people in disparate places are becoming intertwined and interdependent. Analysis of the "family resemblances" and interconnections between the struggles of dispersed young people across national boundaries should be of central concern to contemporary scholars, activists, policymakers, and young people themselves.

## Note

1. UNICEF has added a "Voice of Youth" section to its Web site, which is linked to young people's digital diaries: [www.unicef.org/voy/takeaction/takeaction\\_2692.html](http://www.unicef.org/voy/takeaction/takeaction_2692.html) (accessed 04/08/08).

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