



## Research in Youth Culture and Policy: Current Conditions and Future Directions

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Doria, the fictional main character in Faiza Guène's (2006/2004) acclaimed novel, *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*, is an immigrant teenager growing up in the Paris projects. In the novel, Doria struggles to find her place in a society which seems to offer little hope for the future of the poor, black immigrants whose presence in France defines the postcolonial moment (Dimitriadis and McCarthy 2001). While Doria's parents and those of her friends and classmates long for home, Doria and her generation know only France, despite the difficulties and hardships life there presents. For them, there is only forward movement into a decidedly hybrid future, one in which their identities are in perpetual translation, as they negotiate constantly changing temporal and spatial registers (Hall 2002). In the U.S. context, JoAnn D'Alisera reflects on her study of Sierra Leonean communities in the Washington, D.C. area, as she writes, "These children, for their part, often describe themselves as simultaneously Sierra Leonean, Muslim, and American. In naming themselves, they more comfortably blur boundaries that their parents struggle to maintain in their own and in their children's lives" (p.126).

Doria, and the children and youth in D'Alisera's study, are representative of one category of marginalized youth in developed nations around the world, those of immigrant and refugees. In Doria's case, her family moved to France for economic opportunity, and in D'Alisera's study, families were driven out of Sierra Leone by a brutal civil war. Yet, one another register—a symbolic register—these youth are representative of all marginalized youth in developed nations around the world, who are not at home in the nation where they were born, nor in the world, despite having access to a political citizenship treasured, coveted, and sought by millions fleeing poverty and strife throughout the Third World. Such conditions underscore that procedural access to political citizenship in one nation-state is not enough to secure economic security, hope for the future, and a sense of belonging to a community.

In the balance of this talk, I first want to briefly map the current conditions faced by youth across developed societies today—many of which have been previously discussed at this conference—and then to move to suggesting priorities for a research agenda. First, and perhaps most significantly, youth today face a wholly different set of economic conditions than those which existed a generation ago. Paul Willis's brilliant ethnography, *Learning to Labour* (1977) captures the last moments of large-scale industrial capitalism in England. In the book, he analyzes how working class and marginalized youth reproduced their class positions within an industrialized society. Stressing the agency and the creativity in these youth's practices, Willis documents how these working class boys create a culture of resistance and opposition to authority. But, of course, as is well known, the lads' resistance is pyrrhic, for their opposition to schooling and advancement through the credentialing systems

of capitalism leads only to the shop floor, which, as they grow older, ultimately becomes a prison they cannot escape. Yet, in retrospect, the reproductive marginalization of Willis's lads seems almost idyllic. For Willis's lads, with only a secondary education, are able to secure jobs for life. Today, youth in modern societies with equivalent credentials cannot look forward to such an economically secure—if limited and drab—future.

As Greg Dimitriadis and I discuss in our recent edited collection, *Learning to Labor in New Times* (2004), the late 1990s and the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have bred a new set of realities, and a new set of contexts vis-à-vis class, capitalism, and their relationship to youth and schooling. Willis astutely captures a particular moment in the historical narrative of capitalism, a moment that has evaporated, to be replaced with a story that is more complex and in many respects more troubling. As the structural conditions of capitalism have shifted, corporations in developed nations such as the United States, England, Germany, and Australia have largely closed domestic operations and industrial production, moving operations to free trade zones and “Third World” countries where they exploit a largely destitute, black, nonunionized workforce which is desperate to simply stay alive. In areas such as the Rustbelt of the United States, these corporations have left behind deserted factories and main streets, as whole communities often disappear when the major employer closes. Where I live, in Indiana, such a story appears with alarming frequency in the local newspaper, as the small towns on the outskirts of my university town struggle to survive with the collapse of small industry, and the reality that it is impossible to make a living as a solitary farmer in an age of agribusiness.

Yet, such changes also reflect the major shifts in the constitution of capitalism, as productive labor fades as the real basis of the economic structure, to be replaced with an age where the economy is largely driven by the circulation of capital through the fluctuation of markets. Recent drops in the value of the Dow Jones, the Nikkei, the FTSE, and stock exchanges throughout the world, and threats of a U.S. (and perhaps worldwide) recession illuminate our global economy is driven by stock markets, not productive labor. As Robert Reich (2007) the former Secretary of Labor in the Clinton administration, writes in the U.S. context,

*“All Americans used to be in roughly the same economic boat. Most rose or fell together, as the corporations in which they were employed, the industries comprising such corporations, and the national economy as a whole became more productive—or languished. But national borders no longer define our economic fates. We are now in different boats, one sinking rapidly, one sinking more slowly, and the third rising steadily”* (p. 13).

In Reich's analysis, the only rising boat in the United States – and one could extend his analysis globally – is that of symbolic analysts, those who sell their ideas to corporations and governments. For those who are born without cultural and economic capital, entering such a world is almost inconceivable, so far is the psychic distance between the glittering lights and skyscrapers of lower Manhattan and the gritty realities of the outer boroughs. As as Noel Anderson, Jeanne Theoharis, and Celina Su illuminate in their manuscript, *School Sucks: When Students Talk Back to a Segregated Nation*, poor children in areas such as the Bronx struggle to get an education in a system which has already condemned them to failure and a future of drudgery and marginalization in low paying service jobs in a consumption driven economy.

Finally, I want to draw attention to the economic situation of those youth who are rarely seen or analyzed as marginalized: middle class youth whose prestigious university educations and advanced degrees allow them access to economic gains unavailable to poorer youth. Yet,

among these youth, at least in the United States, there is a desperate fear of economic instability. For example, a few years ago I interviewed university students as part of a research project on how studying abroad had impacted their perspectives on their national and global identity, and their futures. Many of the youth I interviewed were extraordinarily privileged in global terms: they were raised in the wealthy suburbs of Chicago, had the benefits of a generally excellent education, and were close to completing a degree at a university ranked in the top 25 worldwide. Despite all of these advantages, many of these students understood the precariousness of their financial situation. When I asked them about their plans for future travel abroad, most of them responded that there was “no time” for such an indulgence. Instead, they indicated that they needed to proceed directly from undergraduate to graduate school, and to obtain a degree in business, medicine, or law if they had any aspirations of being able to afford a home in the suburb where they were raised. They feared that even taking a one year break to travel or to do volunteer work would mean that they would be behind their peers. And if you look starkly at the numbers, you begin to understand that the downward mobility these students fear is a real possibility. They are correct that the salaries required to live in the suburbs where they were raised are only available to them through the “symbolic analyst” positions described by Reich. If they wish to enter a career such as teaching, nursing, social work, or a myriad of other vital service professions, they will need to move far from roots, family, and friends. When middle-class youth in the United States cannot reasonably assume that they will be able to afford to live in the town where they were raised, they too join the ranks of the “marginalized.”

Thus far in this paper I have discussed the economic conditions which shape youth’s present and the possibilities for youth’s future. I will now turn to a discussion of another important realm—culture—which is also constitutive component of the new mapping of the world at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the introduction to our recent collection, *Youth Moves: Identities and Education in Global Perspective*, Fazal Rizvi and I explore the multiple ways in which youth “move” across the globe today. For a very small number of extremely privileged youth, such movement is literal, as they skirt across a world which for them is essentially borderless. As I discussed in the beginning of this paper, there are also youth who move involuntarily, those who are forced to move because of economic or political realities. Yet, in between, there is a vast swath of middle-class youth around the world whose identities are being shaped by the movement of the global imaginary. Even earlier in this decade – before the explosion of technology we have witnessed in the past two years – Paul Willis (2003) commented on how cultural forms were fundamentally altering class (and I would add racial) affiliations. He writes,

*“Even as their economic conditions of existence falter, most young working-class people in the U.K. would not thank you now for describing them as working-class. They find more passion and acceptable self-identity through music on MTV, wearing baseball caps and designer shoes, and socializing in fast-food joints than they do through traditional class-based forms”* (p. 402).

In my earlier research among youth in a racially mixed high school in Durban, South Africa in 1996 (Dolby, 2001), I made similar arguments, noting that youth’s racial identities are no longer tied to South African soil and the social conditions of a restrictive apartheid state, but are instead negotiated through an engagement with global popular culture. When I returned to the United States in 1996 after a year in South Africa, I carried with me letters from the students to mail to Oprah, so strong was their sense of connection to her and the sense of

promise she represented to them. Students at Fernwood High School did not dream of leaving Durban to move to Johannesburg or Cape Town, but of moving to Hollywood.

Since my research in Durban over a decade ago, the acceleration of technology has created a new world of youth culture. YouTube, MySpace, Second Life, iPods, Blackberries, and the ubiquitous mobile phones are reshaping the potential worlds of youth. It's instructive to note that my husband's six-year old niece – growing up in a decidedly working class suburb of Johannesburg, has more access to technology than I did growing up in a considerably wealthier suburb of Boston in the 1970s. Whatever technologies were available in the 1970s were reserved for the wealthiest – today, even those living from paycheck to paycheck feel compelled to be part of the digital generation. For more middle-class youth, the lines between “offline” and “online” worlds blur, as technology now allows those with high-speed Internet access to go to school, shop, work, pray, and create and maintain relationships without leaving their computer.

The landscape of youth's lives has created a diverse, and often fractured, set of research agendas. In broad sweeps, there are researchers who document the worsening economic and life conditions of poor and working-class youth (those who are marginalized within their societies), and more culturally oriented researchers who map the exciting possibilities of new identities and connections enabled by the technologies available to middle-class youth. In the concluding section of this paper, I will discuss what I see as the limitations of these self-imposed boundaries, and suggest ways in which research on youth and youth culture might productively move in the next decade.

Here, I want to focus on five directions for research on youth, youth culture, and youth policy in the next decade. These suggestions may resonate differently in divergent national contexts—and I should add, may not be relevant at all in some contexts. However, they are meant to provide some initial thoughts towards increasing the visibility of this research globally.

### *1. Rethinking Research on Youth Identities*

Over the past two decades, there has been an explosion of qualitative research which examines youth identities. Such research has explored single and multiple facets of identity, including race, gender, class, sexual orientation, nation, and ability. The research has been situated in dozens, if not hundreds, of national contexts, examines children and youth of all ages, and extends to on-line environments. As youth researchers, we have available to us a significant body of work which helps us to understand how youth negotiate identity in the context of contemporary conditions. One of the major drawbacks of most of this research is that it ultimately has little impact beyond the small community of researchers who work in this area. In contrast, policymakers—in the U.S. and elsewhere—tend to rely on large-scale quantitative work to effect and shape policy. While quantitative research has its use, the qualitative work on youth identities captures lived reality in a way that no survey or statistical analysis can. Those of us who specialize in qualitative research with youth need to do a better job of making direct and pointed policy implications in our own work, publishing in journals outside of our small community of researchers, and inserting our research—as much as possible—into public policy debates.

## 2. *A Focus on Research that Bridges the Divides*

In the field of research on youth, youth culture, and youth policy, we face several significant divides. One is the split between qualitative and quantitative researchers. A second is a divide between those of us who privilege the “economic” and those of us who privilege the “culture”. Finally, a third is the divide between “art” and “science.” Of these three divides, I want to focus my comments on the divide between “art” and “science.” which David Edwards discusses in his new book, *Artscience: Creativity in the Post-Google Generation*, just published by Harvard University Press earlier this year. As Edwards writes, we need to question and rethink what counts as “scientific,” and the value of the ‘scientific’ over “art”, instead creating spaces where what he terms “Artscience” can flourish. He argues,

*“Artscience...challenges the conventional equating of art with aesthetics and science with the scientific method. Art can be useful and derive from the scientific method just as science can lead to aesthetic ends. Is art science, and science art? Or, perhaps it is simply that with artsience these questions have little meaning”* (p. 65).

Like Edwards, those of who are concerned with the future of youth – which is ultimately the future of humankind, need to think about how to break down barriers between what we do and those who do research on the future of our natural and human world. At core, research on youth is also research on the environment, on human rights, on healthcare, on housing policies, on neighborhoods and communities, on economic policy in a globalized environment. We need to work on nurturing these connections as researchers, practitioners, and policy makers.

## 3. *Research and Practice Focusing on the Social and Cultural Agency of Youth*

A large percentage of research in the field of youth culture focuses on the multiple ways in which youth are marginalized, and exploring their identities within the borders, and cracks of society. In contrast, there is comparatively less research which focuses on youth agency – how youth move forward to create new cultural and social worlds despite their marginalization. We need more studies both of how youth act as agents in their own lives, but also of innovative programs designed to serve urban and marginalized youth. For example, The Cloud Foundation in Boston (with a partner in Paris) runs an innovative, art space for urban youth which rests on the belief that the arts can transform society. As researchers, we need to focus less on the identities of individual youth, and more on institutional and policy initiatives – such as The Cloud Foundation – which can provide us with sparks for understanding the multiple ways in which societal transformation is possible.

## 4. *Extending Our Research Focus*

The majority of research which falls under the “youth culture” rubric has tended to focus on youth who are poor, immigrants, black, members of spectacular subcultures, or otherwise marginalized. Only recently has youth culture research taken up work with more middle-class youth, particularly in the context of studying the impact of technology on identity. As I discussed above, while middle-class youth may objectively have access to more social and cultural capital than those who are poor, middle-class youth are not immune from the fears of economic instability and downward mobility. We need more research which focuses on understanding how “privilege” and “marginalization” co-exist, and how economic insecurity is a growing facet of middle-class life, at least in the United States, and limits creativity,

futures, and the ability of well-educated young people to contribute to positive social change. Being trapped in a job in a corporate law firm may not sound like a prison, but if it is not where you want to spend your days, it is no less a trap (though a well-paid one) than the factory floor.

### *5. Research that Focuses on Hope and Opportunity*

Finally, we need to focus on research which works to identify where and how young people see their hopes and opportunities for the future. To speak directly about the U.S. context for a moment—there is substantial evidence that a significant percentage of Barack Obama’s support comes from youth, and from people who have up to now felt themselves unrepresented and outside of the political process. Regardless of whether Obama ultimately wins the Democratic nomination or the presidency, his message speaks to an energy and a sensibility which confounds accepted understandings of the left/right or liberal/conservative divide. Research in this area will help us to understand how youth – in this case, American youth – understand their place and agency in the world, and how we might tap into that energy to promote greater youth involvement in political, social, and cultural realms.

I began this paper by discussing Doria, who is symbolic of youth who feel trapped and oppressed by their hybrid situation, who exist on the margins of a society which denies them a place, space, and opportunity, despite the fact that they have nowhere else to go. Doria’s case, and millions of marginalized youth around the world, are still looking for home. Yet, I end with the hope for the future encapsulated in the candidacy of Barack Obama. At core, Obama’s campaign represents the crossing of boundaries and the creativity which is also captured in David Edwards’ (2008) concept of “artsience.” As researchers, citizens of various nations and the globe, and human beings, we cannot ignore the reality of marginalized youth throughout the world. But we also must work towards more innovative, interdisciplinary, ways of understanding youth’s identities, agency, and translating such understandings into policies and practices which will ensure that we no longer have need of the category of “marginalization” for we have all found a place.

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