May, 2009

Globalization and Youth: Evolving Understandings

Irving Epstein, *Illinois Wesleyan University*

Globalization and Youth: Evolving Understandings

IRVING EPSTEIN

National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State, and Society in Post-Soviet Eurasia by Douglas Blum. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 225 pp. $89.00 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-521-87619-3.

Youth Moves: Identities and Education in Global Perspective edited by Nadine Dolby and Fazal Rizvi. New York: Routledge, 2008. 241 pp. $140.00 (cloth); $36.95 (paper). ISBN: 0-415-95563-7.

Global Youth? Hybrid Identities, Plural Worlds edited by Pam Nilan and Carles Feixa. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006. 218 pp. $170.00 (cloth); $53.95 (paper). ISBN: 0-414-37071-X.

Development and the Next Generation: World Development Report, 2007 by the World Bank. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2006. 336 pp. $50.00 (cloth); $26.00 (paper). ISBN: 0-8213-6541-X.

The concepts of both globalization and youth are noteworthy for the ambiguity that marks their characterization. In various contexts, globalization has been associated with westernization, the expansion of empire, neoliberalism, cultural and economic determinism, the push toward modernist homogeneity, or conversely, interdependency, indeterminism, temporal and spatial flux, hybridity, and interconnectedness, enhanced by the increased communicative possibilities that express themselves within a widely expansive information age. Our understanding of youth is no less complicated. Prevailing political, social, and cultural practices, including child labor, sex trafficking, child soldiering, and early arranged marriage, force us to question modernist and western notions that have assumed the existence of clearly demonstrable demarcations between childhood, youth, and adulthood as distinct stages of human development. In a curious way, the four books subject for review in this essay not only clarify the ambiguities inherent in both of these concepts, highlighting the internal inconsistencies through which they are conventionally discussed, but also demonstrate how a serious engagement with the literature in both areas can extend our understanding of each.

Douglas Blum examines the nature of policy making toward youth in

Azerbaijian (Baku), Kazakhstan (Almaty), and Russia (Astrakhan) in his important work, *National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State, and Society in Post-Soviet Eurasia.* Conversant with the theoretical literature that speaks to globalization and youth issues, Blum uses the three case studies to focus on the way in which policy makers interpret and redefine the meaning of globalization so as to address local values, priorities, and needs. Blum defines globalization as largely, if not exclusively, involving the transmission of western aesthetic and cultural practices, but he views their reception among less "westernized" societies as incorporating distinct patterns of hybridization. He specifically argues that these societies invoke strategies of absorption, rejection, or assertion in confronting globalization imperatives. Absorption, to Blum, implies an uncritical acceptance of the importance of governmental efficiency as defined in neoliberal terms, along with a mechanistic assimilation of western cultural flows (15–19). Rejection occurs as societies appeal to nationalist sentiments, frame globalization patterns as attacks upon the legitimacy of the nation, and view globalization tendencies as inherent threats from the "other" that jeopardize the integrity of a collective sense of identity (20–21). Assertion is a strategy that attempts to define modernity through traditionalism, mixing the desire to preserve a collective sense of one's national identity with the necessity of making accommodations to the pressures that argue in favor of global integration (26–27). In truth, all three of these tendencies are in play when one examines youth policies within the three cases; they are neither mutually exclusive, nor can they easily be separated.

The examples Blum describes in support of his thesis are both relevant and compelling. Thus, he notes the presence of absorption strategies when international music stars are welcomed with fanfare to Baku, when the main library in Altamy is computerized, or when a new shopping mall in Ashtrakan is built. In all of these cases, civic pride is expressed in response to the seemingly reflexive acceptance of these symbols of western materialism. Attempts to promote indigenous, as opposed to western, notions of beauty in the staging of beauty contests, efforts to associate western music and media with moral collapse, and warnings against succumbing to the excesses of western individualism are examples of rejectionist strategies that Blum discusses at length. As these societies promote their national cinema within international forums, and as they repackage folk wisdom and traditional values as reflecting basic neoliberal principles (e.g., the basic tenets of a market system being grounded in pre-Communist history), policy makers invoke assertive strategies in their confrontation with globalization pressures.

In depicting how state, nonstate, and substate actors initiate, implement, and assess policy imperatives involving youth, Blum arrives at two striking conclusions. First, he argues that the peoples within the states that he studies use an awareness of globalization effects with particular reference to their homogenization tendencies to argue in favor of assertive strategies. Global-

ization imperatives, it is asserted, require the state to adapt management strategies valuing efficiency, engage in neoliberal economic policies, and accept at least some western cultural artifacts, not only in order to compete with other states globally but also to preserve the very traditional values that are distinctive to the nation whose future survival is perceived to be challenged. Blum further concludes that this collective awareness of globalization trends results in a consensus among all of the state, nonstate, and substate actors with regard to the efficacy of using assertive strategies, lessening the probability of conflict among the differing political groups as they attempt to implement youth-oriented policies. Both conclusions contradict conventional assumptions about the inevitability of global/local dichotomies, the determinism of westernization trends, the ability of local actors to reshape and reinvent western practices for their own purposes, and the ability of state (government officials), substate (teachers, social workers, etc.), and nonstate (NGO, nonprofit) actors to work cohesively in quasi-modernist (western) environments. Blum is well aware of the limits of a case study approach. The interviews with policy makers and the supplemental literature he compiles cannot adequately represent all of the internal tensions and conflicts that are representative of Russia, Azerbaijian, and Kazakhstan in toto. However, because his case study analysis is theoretically grounded with sophistication and sensitivity, this work deserves to be read by globalization as well as area studies specialists.

The authors of *Youth Moves* and *Global Youth?* largely eschew discussions of policy matters in their respective collections, which focus on globalization as a series of cultural flows. In both volumes, conventional perceptions of youth behavior as involving universal stages of linear growth, accomplished through the expression of autonomy and individual choice, are rejected. In both works, the assumption that youth occupies a developmental space marked by its contingent placement between childhood and adulthood is contested. Instead, the authors view youthful behavior as expressed through cultural artifacts, the media, and newer technology. Youth, in these pages, are viewed as actors who both recognize global cultural practices and enthusiastically reshape and reinterpret them in new and exciting contexts that they find particularly relevant. In reshaping their identities, they are neither passive receptacles of consumerist desire nor independent agents of change. Thus, the linkage of youth culture to postmodernist notions of hybridity, and to the wider field of cultural studies more generally, explicitly promoted in the work of Angela McRobbie, finds specific expression in both volumes.[1]

Youth Moves is certainly the more theoretical of the two anthologies. Jane Kenway and Elizabeth Bullen set the bar quite high in this regard through their discussion of the *flaneur*, the 1840s term for "the gentleman stroller, a

---

[1] See Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1994), 180–81.

street reader, an observer of urban life and a window shopper" (23–24), and by their depiction of contemporary youth as "cyberflaneurs." The authors reject the notion that youth shape their identities as passive consumers of media, however, and argue instead that, through their negotiations of cyberspace, youth both distance themselves from the objects that they view and engage with them in insightful ways, acting as cultural producers as well as critical observers. In so doing, youth demonstrate the capacity to entertain "critical global sensibilities" (30). Catherine Beavis, in her chapter analyzing youth interaction with computer games, further discusses the underappreciated social learning that occurs through engagement with online role play games, where the space provided allows for the construction of new identities and relationships that bridge real and imagined worlds (64).

Most of the authors in *Youth Moves*, however, focus specifically upon identity issues. In their chapter, "Shoot the Elephant," Cameron McCarthy and Jennifer Logue offer a theoretical critique of British neo-Marxist and cultural studies literature of the seventies and eighties for its nationalistic particularism, its generic analysis of class, and its oversimplistic view of power and resistance. These weaknesses are illuminated by recent awareness of the existence of globalized markets and transnational movements involving the international division of labor, migration, and cultural flows (50). More contextualized analyses of identity issues are offered in Michael Giardina's chapter, "Consuming Difference," where the author analyzes the ways in which multicultural encounters within the United Kingdom are flattened and sanitized in the film *Bend It Like Beckham*, and in the chapter "Disciplining Generation M." In the latter case, Aaron Koh describes Singaporean education authorities' attempt to insulate their already globally aware youth from the "harms of global popular culture" through promoting a national education curriculum that attempts to manufacture national and patriotic sentiment. The depiction of youth culture as being harmful and the expressions of moral panic that accompany that association are also present in portrayals of Latino youth culture in the United States, according to Angharad Valdivia (chap. 6). On the other hand, in chapter 5, Jennifer Kelly argues that the failure of African Canadian youth to fully appreciate the distinctive factors that mark their group identity results in self-perceptions that translate blackness according to African American cultural terms.

The challenges Asian international students studying in Australia confront are critiqued by Parlo Singh and Catherine Doherty (chap. 7), who analyze diaries and interviews with both students and their instructors. In this case, the authors conclude that student self-identified aspirations to use education as a vehicle for their upward mobility are unappreciated by instructors, who, in the face of pressures exacerbating their own de-skilling and job uncertainty, critique the perceived lack of intrinsic motivation for educational engagement their international students express.

The fact that such conflict is played out not just in Australia but rather is indicative of the tensions globalization pressures produce throughout the world is reiterated by Peter Demerath and Jill Lynch, who analyze the impact of neoliberal values upon North American suburban high school youth (chap. 10). They never challenge assumptions involving the importance of competing for academic success or the desirability of maintaining stressful work loads because the need to successfully compete within a neoliberal global world order is continually, if uncritically, reaffirmed. A more optimistic view of North American youth is provided by David Alberto Quijada, who, in chapter 12, examines the voices of participants in a summer diversity institute and concludes by noting that, through engaging in discussions about the meaning of social relationships, the youth in his program demonstrate a fundamental concern for social justice.

Two of the more provocative chapters in the volume examine the ambiguities of consumerist activity among youth in India and South Africa. Ritty Lukose, in chapter 8, focuses on the role of fashion within the context of India's rise as a global power. According to Lukose, appeals to traditionalism mask historic gender discrimination and inequality, but appeals to modernity similarly invoke negative reactions to a colonial past. In analyzing the role of beauty pageants and fashion choices, the author describes the ways in which consumption is highly contested as a site for imagining the Indian nation state within a global context where youth understand how restricted their future opportunities may be. Their consumptive choices are thus characterized by expressions of agency that involve resistance to externally prescribed scripts that reify the western, as well as acts of performativity, whereby youth use the process of performance to mediate and redefine their original meanings.

Sarah Nuttall describes the ways in which South African youth, through their promotion of Y culture or *Loxion Culture*, infuse black township culture into the segregated anglo city. Nuttall provocatively argues that the black body, which was made either invisible or hypervisible in the apartheid era, has now been reconstructed to symbolize the "cool" and the "hip." Indeed, in analyzing a series of popular advertisements, Nuttall shows how the country's history of racism is now mocked as whiteness is reinscribed and defined in terms of social class rather than race. The willingness of these youth to distance themselves from their country's oppressive history speaks to their desire to move on and to participate in the creation of a market-driven postracial South Africa. It also, in a troubling way, demonstrates the ease with which they feel comfortable in insulating themselves from the enduring repercussions of their country's history.

The authors of *Global Youth?* focus upon many of the same themes discussed above, although they present their ethnographic case studies in a way that is more accessible to the general reader than in *Youth Moves*. Most of the chapters

in this volume were presented at a meeting of the International Sociological Association in 2002. This adds a strong thematic coherence and cogency to the book. Of key interest to contributors is the ways in which youth form identities that are both hybridized and globalized. In that vein, we learn of the complicated ways in which Francophone youth in Canada and Middle Eastern Asian migrant youth in Western Sydney construct cultures that de-center essentialist identity claims. In the former case, Christine Dallaire (chap. 2) uses the venue of the sports competition to interview Francophone youth from Alberta, Ontario, and Acadia. Dallaire discovers that the meaning of being Francophone is not simply regionally distinctive but also is subject to repeated reinvention, on the basis of the disparate meanings attached to bilingualism, cultural association, and education. In a related study, Melissa Butcher and Mandy Thomas (chap. 3) chronicle the adaptive strategies Asian and Middle Eastern Australian migrant youth employ to manage the cultural dissonance they experience in Anglo-Australian society. The authors argue that, while these youth experience feelings of belongingness or "in-betweeness," they use media, fashion, and friendship associations as a way of asserting a sense of identity that is nonessentialized; they can thus proclaim their Australian identity without compromising conventional ethnic identity markers.

Similar perspectives are offered in discussions of devout Muslim youth living in Indonesia by Pam Nilan (chap. 5) and of postrevolutionary Iranian youth by Mahmood Shahabi (chap. 6). Nilan, for example, describes the way in which Muslim youth embrace products of youth culture without compromising religious beliefs or values. Indeed, it is their ability to participate in global cultural consumption and exchange (e.g., playing religious music on their iPods) that allows them to reaffirm and strengthen their beliefs without sacrificing the opportunity to engage in such participation. In a similar way, cosmopolitan Iranian youth, particularly in Tehran, participate in a number of subcultures, including punk, that allow them to carve out symbolic spaces between categorical acceptance of fundamentalist orthodoxy and western materialism. Arabic, Turkish, Indian, western, and Iranian influences are not only present, but they allow Iranian youth to choose from many cultural alternatives as official and unofficial youth cultures are able to tenuously coexist (126–27).

Many of the authors in *Global Youth?* investigate the effects of punk, rap, and other musical sensibilities upon youth behaviors and consumption patterns. Punk influences in Colombia (German Muñoz and Martha Marín; chap. 7), Catalonia, and Mexico (Carles Feixa; chap. 8), as well as the appropriation of hip-hop and rap musical forms by youth in Dakar, Senegal (Abdoulaye Niang; chap. 9), London Asian youth, and Franco-Arab and West African youth (Rupa Huq, chap. 1), are discussed at length. The authors argue that, as youth have moved from immigrant to mainstream status, composers have felt more confident in creating expressive and unique rhythms.

It would thus be overly simplistic to characterize global experiments with hip-hop, rap, and punk as solely derivative. Youth may be attracted to the generic freedom these media offer so as to express anger and alienation, but by infusing the form with rhythms and lyrics that are culturally distinctive, youth change the form as well. Rap and hip-hop, as distinct cultural forms, offer youth opportunities to be as playful as they are subversive through their use of clever linguistic turns and rhythms.

Even youth subcultures that one would normally describe as bounded, homogeneous, and essentialist are depicted as encapsulating variety and liquidity in these chapters. Of particular interest in this vein are the discussions of Colombian and French skinheads by authors Muñoz and Marín (chap. 7) and Petrova (chap. 10). Thus, those who prescribe to SHARP (skinheads against racial prejudice) and/or those who are self-identified as "Red" or Communist skinheads express more socially inclusive beliefs than those spouting traditionally racist attitudes, pursuing affiliations with leftist immigrant and student groups (189). Nonetheless, French skinheads, in particular, are united in their sense of exclusion from the mainstream, fostered through their perceived victimization due to the effects of globalization and their willingness to combat "otherness" through engaging in violence.

While globalization can thus contribute to feelings of alienation, Todd Joseph Miles Holden (chap. 4) discusses how his two children, living in Japan, are able to negotiate identity issues through their use of a key globalization artifact, the cell phone. His discussion is meant to give greater insight into the world of the "adolecnic," a term particularly relevant to Japanese youth. He thus describes the ways in which the cell phone itself is accessorized according to personal taste. Even more important, cell phone usage, particularly with regard to the text editing function, requires youth to engage in a series of routines that allow them to socially construct their sense of group affiliation, which is important in a society often characterized by its incessant bureaucratization and overt rationality (84–85). In short, Japanese youth participate in globalization at different levels. They are participants in global capitalism at a macro level but consume at the local level (even if their products of consumption originate from the West). They form social associations and subgroups at the micro level, but they can, through their cell phone usage, embrace an overtly atomized sense of individualism (86–88).

Certainly the authors of *Youth Moves* and *Global Youth?* remind us of the complexities that characterize youth culture and behavior in the twenty-first century. My own undergraduate students, upon reading these chapters, intuitively understand the ways in which identity issues and the use of technology and modern media are intertwined. They express an appreciation for the characteristics of globalization that most closely touch their lives: fashion, consumption, social networking, and so forth. In spite of these strengths, most of the authors of these chapters fail to examine issues of class, status,

and power in ways that are as systematic as one might have hoped. As important as the insights gained from these pages are—and they are considerably so—one would have liked to have seen more attention devoted to analyses of tensions within the youth cultures described, more discussion of the ways in which affiliations become bounded and unbounded, and more questioning as to what the long-lasting effects of hybridity might entail.

Such a discussion is totally lacking in the World Bank's *Development and the Next Generation.* Instead, we are presented with a report that makes the case for further investing in youth as a means of enhancing prospects for future economic growth. Their social value is assessed not so much according to a belief in the inherent value of the quality of youth's social interactions or an understanding of the contexts in which their values and dispositions are framed but rather according to their presumed generic ability to increasingly make rational choices that affirm their sense of autonomy and independence. In that vein, much of the text documents the challenges policy makers confront in assisting youth as they move through various transitional phases: completing schooling, joining the workforce, starting a family, and participating in activities involving civic engagement. The human capital approach that marks the thematic assumptions central to this volume is supported by evidence documenting world trends, indicating that investment in youth is a sound economic strategy given the growing size (currently 1.3 billion) of the cohort in many developing regions of the world. This reality both creates future economic risks (the future health and welfare of youth in the developing world will influence success in poverty reduction) and offers potential advantages for developing societies, given the cohort's potential for comparative economic productivity.

Many of the chapters in the report speak to the difficulties policy makers confront in creating cost-effective youth-oriented programs that have lasting results. In most cases, these challenges reflect conventional wisdom and are easily understood. Thus, the authors of the report note difficulties youth confront in learning decision-making skills so as to act less impulsively with regard to tobacco, alcohol, and drug use or sexual activity; they mention the contradictory problems youth face in being forced into labor at too early an age or entering an inelastic job market that is unable to match their education and ability to the positions that are available. They note how important levels of political participation are, yet they recognize that such levels are often contingent upon peer and parental influence and that they are declining when they should be rising. And they discuss the contradictory effects migration patterns produce. These effects include brain drain and brain gain, the sharing of increased information across borders to students whose previous access to information technology will have been extremely limited, and the restricted job markets that newly arrived migrants confront when they resettle in countries with highly developed economies.

The authors of the report acknowledge that more data needs to be collected to ascertain what kinds of programs will be effective throughout the developing world; the successful cases that they document involve descriptions of specific and isolated programs. Some of the more noteworthy projects that are highlighted include microfinance programs specifically involving youth, cash transfer schemes to entice young girls to stay in school by giving them the financial resources to do so, and AIDS prevention programs involving radio and the media. Indeed, the eclecticism that characterizes these approaches argues in favor of a more qualitative approach to innovation than that with which the authors seem to be comfortable with in theory.

Viewed together, these four works demonstrate that our understandings as to what globalization trends portend are subject to change and reinvention. They additionally force us to realize that twenty-first century youth are seeking new ways to negotiate issues of identity and belonging that can be as creative as they are ambiguous and contradictory. It therefore behooves policy makers to question the premises governing their decision making in ways that show an appreciation for a global environment that is increasingly marked by contingency rather than permanence.