

Beyond Cultures and Transitions: A Review Essay on Youth Agency, Precarity, and the Future of Youth Sociology

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Abstract: The *Research Handbook on the Sociology of Youth* stands as a notable contemporary contribution to the field, yet its true worth lies in its capacity to bridge enduring theoretical gaps, challenge the discipline's Anglocentric dominance, and highlight the intricate agency of youth amid increasingly restrictive structural conditions. This review posits that the sociology of youth is at a pivotal point, grappling with global instability and non-linear life paths that necessitate the development of fresh conceptual frameworks. To evaluate the field's preparedness, this review examines a selection of pivotal scholarly works to critique its prevailing paradigms, especially the 'cultures vs. transitions' dichotomy and the passive portrayals of youth that have historically constrained our comprehension. Therefore, the future vibrancy of the discipline hinges on its ability to transcend these divisions. This review calls for a more cohesive, globally conscious, and politically savvy sociology of youth, one that promotes a social-generational analysis capable of connecting personal narratives to historical contexts, agency to structure, and the local experiences of young individuals to the global political economy.

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Introduction – youth sociology at a critical juncture

In today's world, the youth period is increasingly acknowledged as a vital stage for developing identity, engaging politically, and integrating socially (Youniss et al., 2002; McFarland, Thomas, 2006; Loader, Vromen, Xenos, 2014; Martínez et al., 2023). This acknowledgment signifies a broader shift in sociological research, where youth is no longer seen merely as a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, but, rather, as a crucial analytical point for understanding generational dynamics and social transformation (Edmunds, Turner, 2005; Furlong, 2012; Woodman, 2022). As young individuals face rapid technological changes, growing economic disparities, and escalating environmental crises, their experiences illustrate how structural changes are experienced, negotiated, and challenged at the intersection of personal and historical contexts within the family.

In this setting, the book edited by Judith Bessant, Philippa Collin, and Patrick O'Keeffe (2024) stands out as a significant contribution. Released at a time when comprehending youth dynamics is increasingly critical, the book addresses the swift technological, economic, and environmental changes that place young people at the forefront of a modern society's challenges. Through a multidisciplinary examination of identity, inequality, activism, digital culture, and the future of work, this book enriches both academic and policy discussions by exploring the complex conditions shaping youth experiences amid digitalisation, climate crises, economic instability, and global inequality. Young people are often depicted as drivers of social change, reflecting the evolving nature of society through their involvement in education systems, labour markets, political participation, and cultural expression, especially as they tackle urgent global issues such as climate change, migration, and inequality (Hull, Zacher, Hibbert, 2009). Simultaneously, their lives are profoundly influenced by systemic forces, highlighting the dual role of youth as change agents and subjects of institutional constraints.

The book under scrutiny aims to capture this duality through a diverse array of theoretical and empirical contributions. Structured into thematic sections, it explores how large-scale societal changes intersect with youth culture, identity, and political engagement across various contexts. By incorporating contributors from different disciplinary and geographical backgrounds, the editors emphasise a global and intersectional perspective, highlighting how gender, race, class, and sexuality shape young people's lives in uneven and stratified ways. Foundational sociological discussions provide a conceptual basis, revisiting key concepts such as 'youth,' 'generation,' and 'agency,' as well as tracing their development within academic and policy discourses (Bessant, Collin, O'Keeffe, 2024: 17). In doing so, the book positions itself as both a synthesis of the existing scholarship and a platform for advancing new analytical directions in the sociology of youth.

The book primarily explores the theme of youth political engagement, focusing on how activism is reshaped in digital spaces. Judith Bessant's chapter underscores the role of digital platforms in enabling youth-driven movements related to climate change and racial justice, also highlighting young people's exposure to new forms of surveillance and cyberbullying (Millora, Karunungan, 2024: 78).

In a complementary analysis, Philippa Collin's chapter delves into digital citizenship, stressing how online environments can empower young individuals to challenge established power structures and broaden participatory practices despite ongoing issues such as the digital divide and privacy concerns that influence engagement conditions (Kuol, 2024: 86). Collectively, these chapters position youth activism within larger social justice movements and demonstrate the intricate interplay between agency, technology, and power.

The emergence of such a comprehensive book also prompts deeper reflection on the current state of the discipline. As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, youth sociology is at a pivotal point. The field is contending with the significant impact of global economic instability, rapid technological advancements, and evolving social norms on the lives of young people in various contexts. In this scenario, major scholarly works such as the *Research Handbook on the Sociology of Youth* offer a crucial opportunity to evaluate whether youth sociology is theoretically and methodologically prepared to tackle these challenges. This evaluation is not only an academic endeavour but also a pressing necessity, given the increasing structural pressures facing younger generations worldwide.

The study of youth has historically been a sensitive indicator of a broader social change. As Robert MacDonald asks, "What are youth studies for?" (Geldens, Lincoln, Hodkinson, 2011: 351). A compelling answer lies in its ability to shed light on the current landscape and future possibilities of the field. The experiences of young people often highlight and predict broader societal shifts, especially in contexts characterised by high unemployment, fragmented life paths, and increasingly non-linear transitions to adulthood. These dynamics are closely tied to what Ben White (2012) describes as the "generation problem," i.e. a structural tension over access to resources, opportunities, and power between older and younger generations. In such circumstances, youth transitions are no longer predictable paths but contested processes shaped by structural inequalities and intergenerational dynamics.

Traditionally, youth sociology has been limited by a longstanding theoretical division. As Paula Geldens, Siân Lincoln, and Paul Hodkinson (2011) describe, the field has been largely influenced by two opposing schools of thought: the 'youth cultures' perspective and the 'youth transitions' perspective. The former, which has its roots in the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, emphasised subcultural styles and symbolic resistance, viewing youth cultures as forms of opposition to structural marginalisation. The latter approach concentrates more specifically on institutional pathways through education and into the workforce, viewing youth primarily in terms of status changes and economic integration. Although both perspectives have provided valuable insights, their separation has often led to analyses that fail to connect culture with structure and agency with material conditions.

Attempts to bridge this divide have been advanced most notably by Nordic youth researchers. As Gestur Gudmundsson (2000: 127) notes, Nordic scholars have created fruitful "crossroads" by blending Anglophone traditions with German and French theoretical influences, promoting a more interdisciplinary and reflective approach to youth studies. This effort not only questions the

limitations of the culture–transition divide but also highlights the extent to which youth sociology has been influenced by Anglo-centric intellectual dominance. Despite its global focus, this field has often favoured theoretical frameworks developed in specific national contexts, sidelining alternative traditions and viewpoints.

Judith Bessant, Philippa Collin, and Patrick O’Keeffe’s (2024) book should be considered within this complex intellectual environment. The book aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the field, but its true importance lies in whether it reinforces the existing divisions or helps overcome them. This review essay examines the volume not only as a collection of chapters but also as a contribution to the ongoing discussions about theory, agency, political economy, and epistemological power in youth sociology. The main question driving this review is whether the book promotes a more integrated, critical, and globally aware sociology of youth or merely rehashes established assumptions under new thematic arrangements.

Therefore, this review is organised thematically as follows. First, it revisits the foundational ‘cultures versus transitions’ dichotomy and assesses the extent to which the book supports an integrated social-generational framework. Second, it explores how youth agency is conceptualised, evaluating whether young people are seen as active social participants or mainly as subjects of policy and the structural limitations of youth work. Third, it places youth experiences within the broader political economy of global precarity, highlighting the structural conditions that influence employment, education, and life opportunities. Finally, it examines the field’s typical Anglocentrism, following Gestur Gudmundsson’s (2000: 127) critique, and considers the implications for developing a more inclusive and comparative sociology of youth. Through this critical analysis, the review seeks to highlight both the contributions and the limitations of the book while also reflecting on the broader challenges and opportunities facing youth sociology during the times of a significant social change.

Deconstructing the foundations – beyond the ‘cultures vs. transitions’ binary

A significant hurdle for any modern examination of youth sociology is bridging the historical gap between the ‘cultural’ and ‘transitions’ viewpoints. This enduring division has frequently led to limited and fragmented understandings of young people’s experiences, separating the expressive and symbolic aspects from the material and structural ones. A crucial indicator of the book’s impact will be its capacity to encourage a more unified approach that goes beyond this dichotomy. As Paula Geldens, Siân Lincoln, and Paul Hodkinson (2011) explored, these two traditions provide distinct yet incomplete insights. The ‘youth cultures’ tradition, which began with the CCCS, offered valuable analyses of stylistic practices as forms of resistance to structural marginalisation. However, this approach was later criticised for its “reductionist... emphasis on subcultural style as class resistance,” while some later work was seen to overlook the economic sphere amid “a movement towards understandings of youth lifestyles as individually elective, fluid and flexible” (Geldens, Lincoln, Hodkinson, 2011: 348). On the other hand, the ‘youth transitions’ tradition concentrated primarily on

the economic sphere, especially the transition from education to employment. Its main limitation was an often-normative view of adulthood as a 'destination' to be reached through a linear progression of statuses (Wyn, White, 1997 as cited in Geldens, Lincoln, Hodkinson, 2011: 348), which resulted in overly narrow understandings by under-theorising the cultural lives and leisure activities of young people (Geldens, Lincoln, Hodkinson, 2011: 349).

The most promising way forward is a synthesis that considers both the structural forces influencing life opportunities and the cultural worlds that young people create. Andy Furlong, Dan Woodman, and Johanna Wyn, drawing on Karl Mannheim's work, suggest a "social-generational approach" as a valuable framework (Geldens, Lincoln, Hodkinson, 2011: 350). This perspective emphasises that individual biographies are deeply influenced by the generationally specific conditions and expectations that young people face. By linking the structural context with "agency, culture, and subjectivity," this approach offers a more comprehensive lens, enabling researchers to examine how generational cohorts experience and interpret historical moments.

In the light of this analysis, we must critically evaluate Judith Bessant, Philippa Collin, and Patrick O'Keefe (2024) book. Does its structure reinforce the old divide by organising chapters into separate theoretical categories, one for 'cultures' and another for 'transitions'? Or does it actively encourage synthesis, featuring scholarship that bridges these areas? To what extent does it advocate for a generational analysis that connects the intimate details of individual biographies to the broader historical and social forces? The answers to these questions will determine whether the book merely reflects the field's history or actively seeks to shape its future. How young people are conceptualised – as either passive victims of structure or free-floating cultural agents – is a direct result of these foundational theoretical choices.

Reclaiming youth agency – from passive subjects to active agents

The notion of agency is pivotal to a comprehensive sociology of youth. Traditionally, however, dominant perspectives have often portrayed children and young people as passive entities – like "empty bucket[s] to be filled with culture, learning and values" (White, 1994: 852) or as subjects of policy intervention requiring rescue and protection. A forward-thinking sociology of youth should recognise young people as active social agents who navigate, interpret, and challenge their life circumstances. The book's significance largely hinges on its dedication to this more sociologically-sound viewpoint. Adopting an agency-focused approach is not just an academic choice; it is an essential political and theoretical correction to the prevailing, policy-driven "youth-at-risk" models that frequently pathologise young people and depoliticise the structural roots of their challenges.

This tension is vividly demonstrated in discussions of child labour. As Ben White (1994) critiques, the prevailing 'abolitionist' stance aims to completely remove children from the labour market. An alternative perspective, however, contends that the true issue is not work itself, but "exaggerated forms of labour

control and exploitation” (White, 1994: 851). This leads to an “empowerment” or “liberationist” viewpoint, which emphasises supporting the self-organisation of working children to enhance their own conditions (White, 1994: 853). This reframing portrays young workers not as helpless victims but as agents capable of taking collective action.

The complexity of youth agency is most evident in rural and agrarian settings. Ben White (2012) examines how rural youth’s widespread “turn away from farming” should not be perceived as a passive rejection of tradition. Instead, it is often a rational and strategic response to a mix of factors: the deskilling effects of modern education, the chronic state neglect of rural infrastructure, and gerontocratic control over land that hinders their access to a viable future in agriculture (White, 2012: 11, 14). This agency can also manifest in a confrontational manner. An example of youth in Côte d’Ivoire destroying pineapple crops grown by migrants – on land the elders preferred to rent out rather than make available to them – powerfully illustrates young people actively resisting their marginalisation (Kouamé, 2010 as cited in White, 2012: 15).

A thorough sociology of youth, as should be presented in the book, must therefore transcend simplistic binaries that depict youth as either ‘at-risk’ policy subjects or as free-floating postmodern consumers of lifestyle. It must offer analytical tools to comprehend how young people are simultaneously constrained and agentic. It is necessary to consider their “vulnerability... to exploitation by local elites and gerontocrats” (Peters, 2011 as cited in White, 2012: 15) while also acknowledging their capacity for strategic action, resistance, and the creation of their own social worlds. While this agency is vital, it is always exercised within material and structural constraints, which have become particularly severe in the current global economic climate.

The political economy of ‘waithood’ – structural constraints in an era of precarity

Youth unemployment and underemployment are not due to personal shortcomings but, rather, are structural consequences of a global neoliberal capitalist system that values capital accumulation over human welfare (Ariyanto, 2026). Terms such as ‘waithood’ in the Middle East (Ramadan, Assaad, 2008) and ‘timepass’ in India (Jeffrey, 2010) effectively illustrate the extended and uncertain transitions that young people worldwide endure as they are compelled to wait for their lives to truly commence (White, 2012: 9–10). The significance of the book under scrutiny will be determined by its readiness to confront this stark political and economic reality head-on.

The structural aspects of youth unemployment are well established. For disadvantaged working-class youth, Robert MacDonald describes the phenomenon of ‘churning’, i.e. a continuous cycle of moving between unemployment and low-wage, unstable jobs (Geldens, Lincoln, Hodkinson, 2011: 351). This highlights the insufficiency of policy responses that place responsibility on individuals. As Ben White (2012: 11) contends, “Structural problems require structural solutions,” yet the prevailing policy

direction has shifted away from job creation towards encouraging 'do-it-yourself' entrepreneurship, which is a strategy with scant evidence of its effectiveness.

The 'generation problem' in agriculture serves as another compelling example of a structural conflict. As Ben White (2012) analysed, this is not merely a cultural divide but a tangible struggle over resources. The older generation's continued control over land – a crucial productive resource – forces young people into a prolonged state of dependency, leaving them with the options of waiting indefinitely or migrating to urban areas. This scenario demonstrates how intergenerational relationships are fundamentally influenced by economic structures and property regimes, effectively excluding youth from viable futures in rural settings.

A thorough evaluation of the book must scrutinise the depth of its political and economic analyses. Does it link the precariousness of youth transitions to systemic issues such as corporate land grabs, financialisation, and the job-eliminating tendencies of modern capitalism (Bernstein, 2004; Li, 2009 as cited in White, 2012: 11)? A sociology of youth that fails to address these macro-structures and views unemployment as merely a 'transition problem' rather than an inherent feature of the economic system risks becoming a sociology that focuses on symptoms rather than causes. Sociology that engages with these global macrostructures must also critically assess its own intellectual supply chains, which are products of a geopolitical order that favours certain theoretical traditions over others.

Provincialising youth studies – a critique of anglocentric hegemony

While addressing issues on a global scale, the field of youth sociology is significantly shaped by a 'British hegemony' that often goes unnoticed. This dominance influences the core questions, theories, and concepts of the discipline. As noted by Gestur Gudmundsson (2000: 136), the field "escaped American domination only to develop a British hegemony". To foster a truly global and comparative youth sociology, it is essential to recognise and challenge Anglocentrism, and any major handbook should be assessed based on its commitment to this goal. This issue is not limited to the demographic backgrounds of leading authors; it also includes the epistemological and theoretical assumptions within the Anglophone framework which risk becoming the default conceptual tools of the discipline.

Gestur Gudmundsson (2000) provides a detailed examination of this hegemony. The Birmingham School (CCCS) initially served as a defining model for the field and later became a 'scapegoat' against which nearly all other European scholarship had to define itself (Gudmundsson, 2000: 137). This focus on British debates has marginalised other rich intellectual traditions. Influential non-Anglophone theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu (in his early reception) and Thomas Ziehe are often overlooked or superficially addressed in mainstream English-language texts, which remain narrowly focused in their theoretical references (Gudmundsson, 2000: 138).

In contrast, the Nordic youth research community exemplifies the benefits of a more cosmopolitan approach. Its significant achievements include strong interdisciplinary networking and deliberate openness to diverse European traditions, particularly the German thought and the French thought. This enabled Nordic scholars to develop sophisticated applications of concepts such as ‘reflexivity’ much earlier and in a more nuanced manner than was typical in the British discourse of the same era (Gudmundsson, 2000: 135–136). This alternative model underscores the losses incurred through intellectual monolingualism, compelling us to consider the book – a volume from a UK publisher with UK-based editors – within this hegemonic framework. Its ultimate value cannot be assessed solely by its comprehensiveness but also by its inclusiveness. Does it present a truly global array of authors and perspectives, especially from the Global South? Or does it perpetuate the “habitual Anglocentrism” that has long characterised the field (Gudmundsson, 2000: 127)? Does it genuinely engage with non-Anglophone scholarship and research traditions, or does it merely adapt them to a pre-existing Anglocentric framework? Addressing these theoretical, agentic, structural, and geopolitical challenges is the primary task for the next phase of youth sociology research.

Conclusion and implications for future research

This review contends that in order to develop a strong and pertinent sociology of youth for the 21st century, it is essential to move beyond the constraints of the past and embrace new paradigms. An integrated generational approach that surpasses the ‘cultures versus transitions’ dichotomy is necessary; it should be rooted in a solid theoretical commitment to viewing youth as proactive social agents. Additionally, it requires a thorough examination of the political and economic structures that lead to global precarity and a deliberate, ongoing effort to shift away from Anglocentric views in favour of a genuinely global conversation. The ultimate assessment of Judith Bessant, Philippa Collin, and Patrick O’Keeffe (2024) book will depend on how well it meets these standards. Its success hinges not merely on its comprehensiveness but also on its willingness to propel the discipline beyond its familiar traditions towards a more critical, global, and fair understanding of young people’s lives. It should serve as more than just a map of the current landscape; it should act as a compass guiding us towards new possibilities.

The book delves into the varied experiences of today’s youth through a multidisciplinary lens that connects theoretical discussions with real-world issues, making it a valuable asset for scholars and practitioners alike. The editors compile contributions that explore the challenges faced by youth while highlighting their roles in shaping their futures. With significant policy implications in areas such as youth identity, political engagement, and structural inequalities, this book emphasises the need for policies that support youth as active members of society. Its focus on mental health, education, and employment underscores the necessity of holistic approaches to well-being, while discussions on youth participation in environmental activism highlight the importance of including young voices in global policymaking, especially in addressing climate change and inequality. One of the handbook’s key strengths is its ability to link theoretical frameworks with practical insights, offering actionable

recommendations that advocate for inclusive policies addressing systemic inequalities and promoting meaningful youth involvement. Discussions on digital culture, economic insecurity, and political activism provide tangible strategies for empowering young people, ensuring that the handbook serves as both an academic resource and a tool for advocacy and policy development. Ultimately, this handbook enriches youth studies by providing a nuanced exploration of contemporary challenges, engaging with themes of intersectionality, activism, and the impacts of digital and environmental change, while offering policymakers, educators, and activists practical guidance for fostering a more inclusive and equitable future.

From the critical issues highlighted in this review, a distinct agenda for future youth research is apparent. The field should focus on: (1) integrated generational studies, emphasising research that explicitly merges cultural analysis with the examination of structural transitions throughout the life course; (2) agency-centred methodologies, emphasising participatory approaches that involve youth as co-creators of knowledge, thereby challenging the traditional subject–object divide in research; (3) comparative political economy, encouraging cross-national studies on how various configurations of capitalism, welfare systems, and land ownership influence youth futures; and (4) the global South–North dialogue, developing initiatives to translate and promote scholarship from non-English-speaking regions, thereby dismantling intellectual dominance. By adopting this agenda, the sociology of youth can progress beyond its current impasse and realise its potential as a crucial field for understanding and contributing to social justice in a rapidly evolving world.

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Poza kulturami i tranzycjami: esej recenzyjny o sprawczości młodzieży, prekaryjności oraz przyszłości socjologii młodzieży

Streszczenie: Podręcznik badawczy *Research Handbook on the Sociology of Youth* stanowi istotny współczesny wkład w rozwój socjologii młodzieży, jednak jego prawdziwa wartość polega na zdolności do przewyższania trwałych luk teoretycznych, kwestionowania anglocentrycznej dominacji dyscypliny oraz uwydatniania złożonej sprawczości młodzieży w warunkach coraz bardziej ograniczających struktur społecznych. Niniejsza recenzja wskazuje, że socjologia młodzieży znajduje się w kluczowym momencie, mierząc się z globalną niestabilnością oraz nieliniowymi ścieżkami życia, które wymagają opracowania nowych ram koncepcyjnych. Aby ocenić gotowość tej dziedziny, recenzja analizuje wybrane kluczowe prace naukowe w celu krytyki dominujących paradygmatów, zwłaszcza dychotomii „kultury vs. przejścia” oraz pasywnych ujęć młodzieży, które historycznie ograniczały nasze rozumienie tego zjawiska. Przyszła dynamika tej dyscypliny zależy zatem od jej zdolności do przekraczania tych podziałów. Recenzja ta wzywa do bardziej spójnej, globalnie świadomej i politycznie wrażliwej socjologii młodzieży, która promuje analizę społeczno-generacyjną zdolną łączyć narracje jednostkowe z kontekstami historycznymi, sprawczość ze strukturą oraz lokalne doświadczenia młodych ludzi z globalną gospodarką polityczną.

Słowa kluczowe: anglocentryzm, prekaryjność, sprawczość młodzieży, socjologia młodzieży, przejścia młodzieży