Adulthood and the Changing Semantics of Youth

by

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Introduction

Adulthood is a taken for granted category in the social sciences, particularly in sociology. This is noteworthy because it is one of sociology’s avowed aims to deconstruct and reconstruct taken for granted assumptions that permeate social life (e.g. Bourdieu 1988: ix); and it is remarkable considering that time and again sociologists have emphasised the dearth of focused analyses of this ‘life stage’ (e.g. Graubard 1976; Smelser 1980; Pilcher 1995), socially cast as it is between the much-researched areas of childhood and old age. It appears, then, that adulthood is constituted by default rather than scrutiny. This, for example, allows not only social scientists but the culture writ large to conceive of and treat children as ‘human becomings’ on the road to developing into full adult ‘human beings’ (Qvortrup 1994). On the level of individual attitudes, so the story goes, adulthood is the destination of adolescent development; and it replaces idealism with realism, rashness with prudence, lifestyle experimentation with career orientation, self-centredness with responsibility and commitment for self and others. In this vision, sobriety suffuses all that the adult does. Moreover, adulthood is a differentiating concept with considerable effects. For example, individuals in old age may be subject to infantilising experiences because the full capacities attributed to adults are often in all too tangible ways not extended to later life (Hockey and James 1993). Paradoxically, then, in the social scientific as well as the commonsense view adulthood is at once marginal and central. It is marginal as far as dedicated research is concerned, but in both research and everyday life these ideal actors, and the life stage they inhabit are also central, and that on two counts: firstly, by virtue of their position in mid-life course, and secondly,
because of adulthoods’ differentiating power as a political category (Crawford 2006; Sennett 2003: 103–107).

In sociology adulthood figures primarily as the destination to ‘youth transitions,’ where it is presumed to lie at journey’s end, though it is by and large understood that it is comprised of several destinations reached at various times – sooner by some, later by others, depending on origins and opportunities (Pollock 2008). Because of an increasing pluralization and fragmentation of life trajectories there are variations on the theme in the field: some maintain that contemporary actors are likely to move back and forth between youth and adulthood in a ‘yo-yo’ fashion (Pais 2000); others slot in a new life phase preceding full adulthood, such as ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett 2004). While it is unquestionable that transitions from school to work, from the parental home to a place of one’s own, from singledom to coupledom and/or marriage are today subject to considerable fragmentation, stops, reversals and parallel trajectories (Dwyer and Wyn 2001; Pilcher et al. 2003; Holdsworth and Morgan 2005; Walther 2006; Bradley and Devadason 2008; Pollock 2008), to align these social trends with episodic sojourns in ‘youth’ and ‘adulthood’ or other, newly-labelled stages is not only to posit a concreteness that these conceptions lack in lived experience, but it also attributes a normative good to adulthood inherently worth pursuing. To do otherwise is to force ourselves either into a position from where we have to defend the concept of ‘transition’ (as does Roberts 2007), or – and this would arguably be more productive – enter into a dialogue and collectively rethink the meaning of adulthood as a social category. This paper is part of such a rethinking. The task I have set myself is to unpick a contradiction immanent to the meaning of contemporary adulthood: the actualization of a highly selective representation of youth holds the promises of a maximization of life chances, while at the same time attracting diagnoses of a deferral or rejection of adulthood. I contextualise this contradiction and argue
that it is central to a transformation in the meaning of adulthood in affluent societies and milieus.

**Adulthood, Personhood and Social Recognition**

The achievement of adult status in accordance with extant, positively valued prescriptions depends on social recognition (Author 2007). More precisely, it is not only individuals who are accorded recognition for the social realization of adult ideals, but in so doing individuals express their recognition of institutional and cultural arrangements. This is the Hegelian moment of intersubjectivity as taken up by Honneth (1996) in his recognition-theoretical work. For the sake of clarity and consistency I refer to the kind of intersubjective recognition pertaining specifically to adult status as ‘adult recognition.’ The dynamics of adult recognition are implicated in social change. For example, in the two or so decades following the Second World War the meaning of adulthood was clear. A home and family of one’s own, supported by a male breadwinner who was in fulltime employment marked the ideal adult, who was likely to have achieved most of these markers in their twenties. Structural and cultural conditions enabled a close approximation between ideal and reality for many. This ‘standard adulthood’ (Lee 2001) remains robust as a norm even though social conditions have changed dramatically: marriage and family formation are no longer normative and are likely to occur in the third decade of life; education is for many a life-long endeavour; long-term, fulltime employment, if indeed desired, is increasingly hard to find; women have entered the labour market en masse, only to fill the lion’s share of part-time positions. The upshot is that the meaning of adulthood is no longer clear. In fact, the most common way to look at it is to diagnose a deferral of adulthood on a massive generational scale. This conclusion is reached mainly because the standard adulthood of the postwar years remains the benchmark. There is, then, a normative lag between expectations concerning the ‘how’ and ‘when’ of adulthood
and many young people’s practices. This normative lag is tantamount to a ‘recognition
deficit’ (Author 2007), which can be summed up thus: while the labour market (to pick just
one obvious example) rewards mobility and flexibility – the opposite of the will to ‘settle
down’ – commentators and social scientists continue to adhere to the ‘delayed adulthood
thesis’ and so posit young adults as somehow irresponsibly prolonging their youthful
dependence; as if something has gone awry in the collective mind of Generations X, Y and Z.

So, there is structural recognition on the one hand, and discursive misrecognition on the
other. In what follows I will go on to suggest that a cultural imperative of youthfulness
underpins the tension between ideals and practices, between adult recognition and
misrecognition, on the ideological level.

From Adulthood as a Goal to Youth as a Value

The cultural apotheosis of youth has a long tradition, with the iconographic representation of
youth signifying beauty, strength, vitality – but also educational malleability – going back to
antiquity (e.g. Schnapp 1997). Later, youth becomes synonymous with modernity. In the
wake of Europe’s ‘double revolution’, as yet in the absence of a culture of modernity,
mobility and restlessness as emergent, central attributes of modern times enter into a search
for a collective signifier. And it is to youth that this function falls, ‘because Europe …
perceives the experience piled up in tradition as a useless weight, and therefore can no longer
be represented by maturity, and still less by old age’ (Moretti 2000: 5, original emphasis).
The meanings and practices of youth evolve and change along with social relations and
sensibilities. More than an aesthetic idea, it settles in Western societies’ self-understanding
and individuals’ orientation to life. Youth is lifted from the determinant of age, in connection
with which its place was taken by ‘adolescence’ from late-19th century. Rather, youth has
gradually become a lifestyle for all ages. With this semantics expansion youthfulness emerges as a cultural, and even moral, good.

At the core of youth’s semantic expansion lies a selective and often contradictory validation of its socially constructed qualities. For instance, as Levi and Schmitt (1997: 9) put it, ‘[w]hereas advertising’, as one salient mode of the dissemination of ideals, ‘extols youthful values (beauty, strength, speed, energy, freedom), everyday social life is marked more by a fear of young people and the disturbances for which they are held responsible by the defenders of public order and convention’. Youth as a way of life is promulgated as desirable, while the supposedly universal characteristics of adolescence (youth’s problems child) are seen as undesirable and are to be left behind. The idea is to be adult and youthful but not adolescent: to be open to change, but responsibly so; to be willing to live in the present only, but to invest in a secure future; to be mature, but not settled; to improvise, but know what you want—to be adult and eschew settling down. Berger’s (1966: 69) conception of maturity as ‘the state of mind that has settled down, come to terms with the status quo, given up the wilder dreams of adventure and fulfilment,’ so indicative of the time during which he wrote his treatise on sociology, is increasingly inappropriate. Experimental attitudes and dreams of adventure are today no longer contrary to the status quo, but an imperative component of it. I will elaborate on the social antecedents of this situation below. But first, some remarks on the recent history of youth are apposite.

**Youth, Recognition and the Market**

By the 1950s the metaphysics of youth, with its origins in antiquity and revitalized in nineteenth-century Romanticism, had encountered its twentieth-century realization. First in the United States, then in other Anglophone societies, and finally in continental Europe,
advertising agents and marketers set out to harness not only what was perceived to be young peoples’ creative potentials by either employing or emulating them, but also to capitalize on greater affluence and the corresponding demand for youth-specific commodities (Marwick 1999). Most importantly, segments of the market recognized and exploited an attitude of what was to become the driving force of a booming culture industry: young peoples’ aversion to anything grown up, to anything reminiscent of ‘the mainstream’, ‘the establishment’ or ‘the system’. Through music and its promulgation on proliferating record labels, radio and television shows and magazines, and its affinities with particular fashions and lifestyles, the cultural industries not only expressed but also promoted what being young meant. The tropes and ideology of youthfulness—élan and verve, flexibility and mobility, risk-taking and experimenting propensities, creativity and thirst for change, situational living and present-centeredness, cutting-edge know-how, up-to-dateness, and beauty—came not only to be understood as desirable in their individually embodied sense; they became crucial to the profitable operations of commodity and labour markets.

For one, the increasing relaxation of what counts as age-appropriate consumption behaviour nurtures peoples’ sense of proliferating options regarding self-presentation. Tastes for fashion, music, electronic gadgetry and leisure pursuits need no longer take their cues from the teenage/adult binary. From a marketing perspective this means that the profitable leanings of teens, with small product and advertising modifications, also apply to older—even much older—age cohorts. Market share thus increases along with the expanding target group. Secondly, labour market conditions across the OECD are to a much greater extent commensurate with the semantic expansion of youth than this was the case during the three decades after the Second World War. When long-term, fulltime employment is fast becoming a thing of the past and a growing percentage of working people fill positions in precarious
temporary or part-time employment and when (partly as a consequence) time horizons contract, flexibility, openness to change, risk-taking attitudes and short-termism do not only constitute an elective affinity with structural and cultural exigencies, but spell the normalization of a stance toward life in general. It is in this context that historian Pierre Nora’s (1992: 510) view acquires particular poignancy:

Youth … has emancipated itself from the sociological reality of being a social minority and even freed itself from the symbolism of age to become an organizing principle for society as a whole, a mental image that guides the distribution of roles and positions, an end unto itself.

The De-differentiation of Youth
Today’s semantics of youth, so it seems, are strongly integrative. They provide a powerful ideology which naturalises the imperative of flexibility in the labour market where it underwrites the supply of ‘youthful’ human resources – of people, that is, who are open to change and so malleable to structural fluctuations. With respect to consumption, the parameters of recognition are now shifting in a more inclusive (and thus more profitable) direction as commonsense knowledge about age-appropriate practices is tending toward more openness. Arguably this is counteracted by the symbolic prescriptions of advertising promising recognition subject to the ‘right’ purchase. The point here is this: just as the identification of adolescents through social scientific and market processes led to young peoples’ integration into the industrial system (Gillis 1981), so the contemporary de-differentiation or expansion of youth effects individuals’ integration into society under prevailing conditions. From the standpoint of the market, de-differentiation, just like yesterday’s differentiation, leads to homogenization as the plethora of choices and options
appear now to be open to all. But there is a qualitative difference: while the teenage market of the postwar era at once helped differentiate teenagers from the parent generation and so homogenized teens and adults as groups, the market driven homogenization of today is manifest in the degree to which the differences between age cohorts are smoothed over.¹

For those who most directly benefit from commodity and labour market conditions the semantic expansion of youth is good news, especially with respect to the post-1970 generation. This generation lacks the social memory of a time when different conditions prevailed. Its members have interiorized modes of life that are most conducive to the market processes of contemporary modernity. Their performance as flexible and mobile market actors has to a large extent determined the degree of social recognition they have been able to attain. As youthfulness has become the signature of a whole culture, its tropes constitute an overarching value in itself and perhaps especially for those who have outgrown its biological delimitations.

**Conclusion**

Contemporary transformations in the semantics of youth have at least in part become possible because the highly differentiated market has enveloped the core constituent of the contemporary dynamics of adult recognition, *flexibility in all spheres of life*, in a dream of long cultural standing: individuals’ desire for youthfulness. To a significant extent, the market individualises systemic conditions because this ideology of youth has become naturalized in the context of systemic and cultural demands. And so, youth as a value is today replacing adulthood as a goal. This trend is part and parcel of contemporary uncertainties about adulthood, about what ‘being a grown up’ means and what promises it holds.
Notes

1 The ‘disappearance of one of the cultural mainsprings of our societies during the last century’ (Gauchet, 2000: 24) – youth rebellion – may well be both cause and consequence of this development.

References


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