Review Essay/Essai rendu

Youth Studies Comes of Age

Ken Roberts, *Youth in Transition: Eastern Europe and the West*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 248 pp. $US 34.95 paper (978-0-230-21444-6), $US 99.95 hardcover (978-0-230-21443-9)

Ani Wierenga, *Young People Making a Life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 256 pp. $US 85.00 hardcover (978-0-230-54928-9)

The sociology of youth, or more generally, youth studies, is a fast growing area worldwide, in part because of the specialized academic periodicals now available, particularly those in English such as the *Journal of Youth Studies* and *Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research*. Research Committee 34 (Sociology of Youth) of the International Sociological Association boasts one of the larger RC memberships, and has been instrumental in promoting international youth research. Unfortunately, Canada lags far behind in this field, most notably behind the UK and Australia, from which the books under review originate.

Both books are stimulating products of years of youth research by the authors, and their sophistication testifies to the increasing maturity of this field. *Youth in Transition* is the more ambitious of the two, in that it encapsulates political and economic developments over the past few decades throughout Europe, including the old Soviet bloc countries. Ken Roberts is one of the senior "statesmen" in UK youth research; his encyclopedic knowledge of political events, and their impact on young people since before the collapse of the Soviet Union is breathtaking. *Young People Making a Life* is somewhat less ambitious, restricted to developments in a rural area of southern Tasmania, but Ani Wierenga convincingly links political and economic events there to worldwide trends affecting young people.

Roberts begins by showing how conditions have changed for young people in Eastern Europe since 1989, emphasizing the greater difficul-

ties in the post-communist period faced by youth whose formative years were during the Soviet era in comparison to those whose grew up after 1989. Comparisons are also made with conditions in Western Europe and other parts of the world (including Canada in a few instances), in chapters devoted to labour markets and educational systems, which he argues are converging in structuring the increasingly prolonged youth period. From these foundations, Roberts devotes an entire chapter to a central process in young people's lives worldwide as they have been affected by globalization and neoliberalism — individualization. This chapter is especially useful in showing how the individualization process is more than a contested abstraction. General sociologists who have only read extreme poststructuralist claims concerning this concept will benefit from seeing the nuances and complexities of the individualization process in the lives of young people in different societies, and how the structure/agency debate takes on a new life with the identification of "structured individualisation" by late modernists.

The remaining chapters of *Youth in Transition* will be of most interest to sociologists specializing in family, leisure patterns, class, and political engagement. Roberts concludes with an excellent chapter summarizing the global convergence of youth transitions in the form of structural underemployment, the massification of higher education (including the worldwide decline of secondary-level vocational training and its creep into the tertiary level of academia), destructured transitions into adulthood (as youth labour markets collapse and the young flee into higher educational systems), the global spread of youth cultures, and the paradoxical depoliticization of the young.

Wierenga's *Young People Making a Life* is a social psychological analysis with an interpretative emphasis. Her book is unique in providing a longitudinal, qualitative study that combines rich ethnography with interesting analyses and theory development of the subjectivity of her respondents. This 15-year study began in the early 1990s when she was a youth worker in a small Tasmanian community, and is based on interviews she conducted with a group of 32 young people "coming of age," for her Honours BA and then her PhD dissertation.

Wierenga clearly documents the negative impact of globalization on rural communities. The community she studied was stripped of most of its means of livelihood over the course of her research. Young people were left with few local options, forcing them after grade 10 to seek *postcompulsory* educations or jobs elsewhere. She describes how they coped with this, looking for new and old sources of meaning in their lives, and struggling with an indifferent or hostile labour market. The differing coping styles she identified rely largely on different approaches

to social connections, negotiation styles, "practices of engagement," and the channeling of resources.

Wierenga addresses some of the same themes as Roberts and touches on many of the same debates in the youth literature: the collapse of the youth labour market and the necessity of pursuing higher forms of education, the individualization process, the role of the family in youth transitions, and the structure/agency debate. By the very nature of her social psychological perspective, more detail is provided on the personal and sometimes intense and troubled struggles of young people with the protracted, disjunctive transition to adulthood, and what it means for their future prospects. With her interpretative approach, we hear about these experiences through the voices of her young informants. Wierenga develops these data into something of a middle-range theory centred around typologies of the strategies her informants used to cope with the demands placed upon them by the individualization process and the structural barriers and opportunities in their individual lives.

Like other fields of study, youth studies is approached in a variety of ways that represent epistemological or disciplinary cleavages, but a more catholic approach on the part of a book author might have avoided or reconciled antagonisms among those who take different approaches to the same problem, and in the process advanced the field further. Neither author attempted such reconciliations. I will provide a few examples of where each author might have bridged epistemological or disciplinary boundaries and thereby enhanced their analyses and added more value to the field.

While Roberts makes a number of bold and innovative arguments, some political economists will want more analysis of neoliberalism as a chief cause of difficulty in the lives of young people in the countries he analyzes. In its absence, there is a sense of acceptance of, or resignation to, the inevitability of neoliberalism and the "new normal" it has created in prolonged transitions fraught with risks, misdirections, and dead ends. Roberts certainly refers to neoliberal influences, but they are underplayed, treated almost as functional, without any explanation for what functions the disjunctive, struggle-ridden transitions to adulthood created by neoliberalism might play in present or future society. Consequently, the reader is left with a curiously inconsistent conservatism: having identified a litany of problems facing young people and massive failures on the part of governments and markets to provide security in transitions, Roberts is oddly complacent about the current situation; he provides no policy recommendations and ends by chiding youth researchers for being in a "crisis mode." He seems to think that because most previous attempts to remedy youth problems have failed,

we are stuck with them, in a now "normalized" situation, until future generations of young people develop the political consciousness to rise up against the system that disadvantages them. At the same time, youth researchers who show concern for the impact of disjunctive and risky transitions are accused of blaming young people with what he identifies as the "scarring thesis" that disadvantages experienced during this protracted period will affect future life chances. The implication seems to be that we should not deplore these disadvantages because by doing so we are somehow placing young people in a negative light.

In contrast to Roberts's complacence about the impact of neoliberalism, Wierenga conveys an urgent concern for the impact of neoliberal globalization on a small rural community and for the young people struggling to make the transition to a meaningful, adult independence (which she carefully shows has different meanings for different people). Roberts might dismiss her as being in "crisis mode" but Wierenga could counter by pointing out his remoteness from the lives of the young, and his acceptance of the "grand narrative" of neoliberalism and its consequences. At the same time, more positivistic readers may find Wierenga's approach preachy at times, in a vein of political correctness that attempts to be nonjudgmental at all costs. At times she goes further than Roberts in her youth advocacy, leaving little allowance for researchers to evaluate the wisdom of certain trajectories undertaken by some young people, even if that evaluation recognizes the structural obstacles they face.

Substantively, those who have seriously studied the structure/agency debate may find the depictions of agency among Wierenga's respondents confusing. Wierenga seems to claim that her respondents are equally agentic in their choice-making, without considering that agency is best viewed as a variable. Treating a concept as a constant (i.e., with no variation) renders it ineffectual from an analytic point of view. Instead, she develops a typology of different forms of (equivalent) agency. This is useful in some respects, but these types could easily be ordered along a continuum reflecting degrees of adequacy within specific contexts, which she does not do. Clearly, all young people make choices, but choice making cannot be all there is to agency if the concept is to have meaning. Some choices are more prudent than others, and people who make more prudent choices tend to do better in life than others, even if they face structural obstacles. In fact, agency is often understood in the literature in terms of the ability to overcome obstacles by penetrating structures, not by making choices that reinforce the obstacles to that penetration.

Finally, Wierenga identifies her approach as employing grounded theory, and while she does develop theory as she goes, much of it is available elsewhere. She did not take advantage of, and build upon, theor-

etical developments in various areas, like social capital theory or social psychological approaches to identity (one approach to identity formation uses a typology identical to her core categorization of respondents but with different terminology, and it is built upon hundreds of studies over the past 40 years). Nevertheless, the fact that her work independently replicates these other developments attests to the validity of the work she accomplished on her own.

The strengths and limitations of both books show that the sociology of youth has come of age as a field of study replete with core concepts, theories, and findings, and a vibrant community to debate the merits of various interpretations of that core.

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