

## **Prospects for Youth in Postindustrial Societies**

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The industrialized countries of Europe, North America, and Asia are now well into a period of economic transformation that appears to be as profound in its social effects as the Industrial Revolution itself. As strategies of production and distribution change dramatically, and as the movement of people and goods across national borders accelerates, the conditions in which adults live and children are raised are shifting. No groups in society are more profoundly affected by these changes than are adolescents and young adults, who are themselves in a period of personal transition from childhood to adulthood, from appropriate dependence on others to responsibility for the welfare of others, from preparation for future economic and civic participation to actual participation.

It is unclear to young people – and, when they are candid with the young, to their parents, mentors, and advisors – just how they should prepare. Those in positions of political and economic power and influence agree that a more highly educated workforce will be required in the future, a workforce able to participate in defining and evaluating their own work, rather than just following orders, and able to learn new skills several times during their working lives. It is assumed, therefore, that young people should spend substantial portions of their adolescence and young adulthood in some form of education and training. But no one knows exactly how this education ought to proceed. Narrow preparation for a specific trade or professional career is not likely to produce the skills and habits that will enable productive adaptation over a lifetime of work. Yet broader philosophical or “liberal” education seems too isolated from the demands of real-world participation.

Although young people are spending more time in education and training institutions, these may not be the only, perhaps not even the most important,

agencies of passage from childhood to adulthood. Traditionally, the workplace has been a locale in which young people were socialized into the roles and responsibilities of adulthood and where they learned many of the skills they would need as workers. As recently as a generation ago, the majority of young people in most countries left secondary school to join the workforce directly, either as fully participating wage earners – usually in unskilled blue-collar occupations – or in some form of structured apprenticeship. On the job, young people learned not only the particular skills needed to do the work but also the *discipline* of work, from punctuality, to following the rules and rhythms of the workplace, to the social forms that governed interaction in and around the workplace. Being a worker or apprentice also gave the young person access to the adult social life of the community. No longer a child, he (and sometimes she) could then join in the informal gatherings of adults, including the after-work drink, church and political meetings, and sports and communal excursions.

Religious (and quasi-religious) and labor movements supplemented the informal socialization opportunities with organized youth programs. These youth programs often provided young people who were no longer in school and whose work required more discipline than thought with *thinking spaces*, as Perret-Clermont has called them (see Chapter 1, this volume): places in which they could learn about ideas and events beyond those of their immediate job and community; reflect on social and personal possibilities; and cultivate personal interests in the arts, politics, religion, science, and technology. Such programs functioned against a backdrop of expectations and socialization provided by the work experience. If factory or other unskilled work was repetitive and not likely to foster human and spiritual development, youth agencies could provide the “antidote.” Meanwhile, the experience of regular, respected work provided young people with a structured, adult role in society. They could – often with the support of youth groups – envisage a future that included them as productive members of society.

Today that nexus for socialization of young people has broken down. Traditional entry jobs are disappearing, and high rates of youth unemployment have been the norm in most industrial countries for some years. In other countries, there are plenty of jobs, at least for mainstream youth, but these are often part-time and short-term, so young people *churn* from job to job (Zemsky, 1997). They earn enough to satisfy some immediate consumer desires but not enough to take on family responsibilities. Above all, they do not experience the social induction into adulthood that used to accompany early work participation.

In countries with strong welfare systems, the economic impact of youth unemployment or underemployment is substantially mitigated. Income alone cannot provide the socialization into responsibility that becoming a member of the adult workforce used to provide, however. Official youth groups and training institutions are not adequately filling the *socialization gap*, and to many adults, youth appear to be increasingly alienated from mainstream, productive society. This alienation, sometimes accompanied by increased youth crime, is exacerbated by the presence of mixed ethnic populations with differing social, cultural, economic, and (sometimes) citizenship statuses. At the very least, large segments of the youth population seem to be adrift, deprived of a sense of the future and unsure that they can find a welcoming place in the adult life of their countries.

The problem of alienation and drift is highest for youth from marginal populations: for example, the children of immigrants and members of certain ethnic minorities. But the social dislocation created by changing economic conditions is no longer a problem of just the underclass. Alternative *youth cultures* attract the children of even the most privileged. The reason for this must lie in something more than the appeal of the media that promote these alternatives. Young people clearly want something that the formal institutions of which they are a part cannot, or at least do not, provide. What is that something? Could mainstream institutions do a better job of providing it? Perhaps they could, but only if those in charge are able and willing to examine the alternatives closely and to consider the possibilities of new forms of organization that are better suited to an era in which ideas and information flow without apparent control and in which the boundaries between youth and adulthood are far less clear than formerly.

This massive *destructuring* provided the backdrop against which the conference that forms the foundation for this volume was convened. We were aiming to use recent research on learning, socialization, and identity formation to suggest approaches to *restructuring* that would respect current political and economic realities. We began with an apparently simple question: What would it take to help young people join society?

It quickly became clear that our formulation was filled with contradiction and irony. For what could *joining society* mean? Except in rare pathological instances, children enter the world as social beings, members of a functioning micro-society of family closely connected to others. As several of our authors show in convincing detail (e.g., Pontecorvo, Hofer, Tudge), children and adolescents function as part of intergenerational and multi-institutional groups, and their cognitive competencies, social identities, and preferences are shaped by interactions in these primary social groupings. From the

moment of birth, children are joined to the several microsocieties in which they participate. The simple underlying message of these often complex analyses is that, with rare exceptions, people of all ages are socially joined in whatever they are doing.

In everyday language, the term *joining society* sometimes means becoming an adult, that is, behaving and being treated as an adult rather than a child or youth. But what is the definition of *adult*? Adulthood sometimes means being a parent, but what about very young parents, teenage mothers for example? Have they joined adult society? And have others who choose to delay or even to forgo parenthood given up on adulthood as well? It seems clear that a strict definition of adulthood as taking on the position and responsibility of leading a family is not applicable today.

Joining society as an adult is sometimes defined in terms of working: being economically productive rather than economically dependent. Yet this definition provides no more clarity than family status does. Our judgments of what it means to be productive and adultlike, even in economic terms, are very contextualized and nuanced. Depending on his country and subculture, a 30-year-old man still living with his parents but holding down a steady job may be considered dependent, whereas a 30-year-old mother who chooses to stay at home to care for her child is likely considered independent. Joining society means having a career, an adult social identity related to one's economic or work function. But what can this notion of career mean when today's life trajectories are broken or unpredictable or when we are told that many people will have two, three, or even four different careers in the course of their lives, and when technological changes, in particular in the field of information and communication technologies (ICT), modify the times and the places for work and training and induce the creation of new trades (Schürch, 2002)?

Least clear of all is the notion that one joins society by becoming part of the social mainstream. This may mean joining a mainstream religion as opposed to a cult. It may mean voting or otherwise participating in official political or civic life. Or it may just mean being a law-abiding citizen, playing by the rules, avoiding criminal or marginal activities. But what about those for whom there is – or is perceived to be – no place within the mainstream? If society appears to be prohibiting your joining, how can you join? Do you face a life of alienation or opposition? Or might you *create* alternative societies, subcultures that are more receptive, comfortable, and even economically fulfilling?

Such youth-constructed societies in fact exist – *gray zone* organizations that, for the most part, do not have much in the way of official sponsorship

and may evoke fear and concern among mainstream citizens. Perhaps a closer examination of these subsocieties can help point the way to more “official” solutions.

### **What Do Youth Want? Lessons from Youth-Led Organizations**

To imagine new forms of social organization that might work for today’s youth, we need to begin by asking what the young themselves seem to want and what seems to attract them. What evokes their loyalty and willingness to expend effort? The chapters by Heath, Roulleau-Berger, Hünedeide, and Coulon (all in Part II of this volume) describing gray zone youth organizations begin to provide an answer. Each of these chapters describes a microsociety, mostly created and managed by young people themselves, that provides for its members a well-structured environment in which to engage in work they view as productive and within which a range of social and economic needs can be met. The organizations described in these chapters range from those that mainstream society can embrace with little reservation (e.g., the performance and sports groups described by Heath) to the most frightening of neo-Nazi youth groups (Hünedeide). Some, such as the gray market cooperatives described by Roulleau-Berger, occupy a more disputed territory. Despite the different political and economic niches that these organizations fill, however, they are stunningly similar in terms of providing basic social functions for their young participants. The following are some core features shared by otherwise very different organizations operating in different countries and in very different political and social conditions:

*Earned entry.* Individuals become members of youth-constructed organizations by proving themselves, not by right of birth or assignment by an official organization. Some have initiation rites. All have rather elaborate rule structures. Failure to live by the rules leads to expulsion. Membership is thus never permanent but is continuously earned.

*Ritual, belonging, and identity.* Membership is symbolically affirmed by participation in rituals that mark one as an insider. These can be religious and peaceful in nature or may involve ritual violence of various kinds. Participation in such rituals establishes and affirms one’s identity as a member – both to oneself and to one’s fellow members.

*Group support for individual needs.* Each of the organizations studied has certain communal commitments to its members. Contributions to economic and family needs, including the care of dependent siblings,

is part of what all of the youth-based organizations offer. Backing up the individual in controversies (such as gang confrontations) also provides some sense of stability and protection for young people who may be living in threatening conditions. For youth on the margins, this economic and protective function plays a central role, making it possible to live more comfortably in the larger official society, even if not able to join it fully.

*Short-term, visible payoffs.* For young people drawn to the kinds of youth-based organizations reported here, the future is uncertain and unreliable. The organizations that attract them are focused on success that is visible in a relatively short time span. In the eyes of the youth who are involved, one attraction of the organizations is that they are focused on action in the here and now rather than on preparation for uncertain opportunities later.

*Will to productivity.* Youth-based organizations reveal a hunger among young people for productive engagement in society. They want to do something that they view as worthwhile. They want to be recognized for real achievements. They do not want handouts or praise that they do not trust as authentic. They want to earn their way, albeit sometimes in ways that mainstream society finds questionable or disturbing.

### **Productivity and Work as Elements of Youth Socialization**

These features of youth-run organizations point to some features that might become elements of redesigned official programs for youth development. Consider first the central role of work itself – the will to produce in the here and now. Young people may be creating a new version of the *work ethic* described almost a century ago by Weber (2001). Like 19th-century Protestants, participants in today's youth-led organizations seem to value productive work not just as a means to an economic end but also as a mark of identity, a kind of social validation of their importance and membership in a valued group.

These young people may be trying to recapture an important piece of what official society has denied them. William Julius Wilson (1996) brought to our attention the devastating intergenerational effect of the disappearance of work within an entire community. Growing up in a world in which their parents and other older relatives are not living within the discipline – and rewards – of regular jobs, young people lack an image of the possibilities of work and often turn to other ways of getting along or, sometimes, prospering. Catherine Newman, whose earlier work had documented the devastating effects of permanent job loss on the families of managerial and

technical professionals (Newman, 1999a), has also shown that, for marginal youth, even low-paid, routine jobs can serve as important routes to social participation. In other work (Newman, 1999b), she demonstrates how young people in the most marginal communities of the United States use low-paid, dull fast-food or similar jobs to earn money (perhaps for tuition in training courses) as well as to define themselves as productive members of the broader society. So work appears to play a key role in youth development, not only for young people in the gray zone organizations described in this volume but also for young people climbing a more establishment-honored ladder of training and preparation.

Here, then, is a most unlikely socialization vehicle for a joinable society. It is work itself – dull, uninteresting, underpaid, but productive work – that can, under certain circumstances, provide a way into the society at large. Young people would certainly prefer that what they do not be dull and underpaid. But they do want to work. It appears that welfare and other social payment schemes, although they may be part of a full youth development policy, do not meet young people's need to feel productive and responsible. Without turning it into simple exploitation, how might we harness this will to effort and responsibility? Some years ago, Steve and Agnes Hamilton (in press) described to American audiences the socializing functions that the German youth apprenticeship system fulfilled alongside its education and training functions. At a time when established youth apprenticeship systems in Europe are challenged by new tastes for higher education, along with shifts in the economy, it will be important to maintain productive work opportunities for youth as an important element in revised programs. Countries such as the United States, whose education systems generally treat youth labor as an annoying fact of life rather than a potential resource for socializing young people, will need to reconsider some very deep assumptions that providing maximum learning opportunities for young people calls for keeping them mainly in some form of schooling well beyond what young people themselves might prefer.

### **Communities of Practice and the Dilemma of Training**

Besides the will to produce, something else can be learned from examining the alternative gray zone organizations that young people inhabit so much more enthusiastically than they do many of the organizations created for their benefit by the establishment. This is the importance of *communities of practice*, a term originally used by ethnographers to describe the unofficial social groupings that mediate between the official rules and defined roles of

formal organizations and what it actually takes to get the work of those organizations done (Brown & Duguid, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Suchman, 1995; Wenger, 1998).

A community of practice is a group of people who engage in coordinated action aimed at a shared goal. There is often substantial learning involved for individual members of the group and for the group as a whole, but the focus of effort is on completing current work. There is also much social interaction, in forms often different from those of formal meetings, official training sessions, or other management events. By observing a community of practice, one sees not just socializing, not just learning, but also productive doing. The task that is worked on has economic or social value; it is not designed as a learning exercise but rather as an effort to provide a product or service valued by someone external to the group: the audience that will attend a theater production, the customers in a street market, or political leaders. This external validation appears to be essential to the proper functioning and the appeal of youth-led organizations as well.

Productive doing through social and cognitive coordination is characteristic of all the many studies that now exist of effective communities of practice in the workplace. In one of the earliest such studies, Julian Orr (1990) described the practices of Xerox copy machine repairmen who, in their down time between repair calls, traded stories about difficult repair cases and worked out possible solutions for challenging new cases. Other examples of such studies have documented how ship navigation (Hutchins, 1993) and airline cockpit crews coordinate their thinking and action (Hutchins & Palen, 1997); how ground control crews in an airport act together to bring a plane into a gate safely and on time; and how a news staff monitors information coming in over a wire service and informally distributes topics to appropriate individuals. In each of these studies, there is a striking contrast between what groups of workers actually do and what the company manual specifies as standard operating procedure. Supervisors of these productive work groups often do not know about the unofficial practices of their workers. And the workers themselves often hold the knowledge tacitly. Knowledge is embodied in workers' everyday actions, and participants often cannot easily articulate their knowledge to others (hence the need for ethnographic research to document and describe the existence and functioning of communities of practice).

Although focused on production, communities of practice can also provide substantial learning opportunities for individual members. For example, Goodwin (1995) showed how novices in a chemical production plant are able to produce pure products and learn new skills at the same

time. From a very different theoretical perspective (more concerned with finding ways to include unskilled and undereducated workers in manufacturing that was becoming increasingly demanding technically), Bertrand Schwarz (1994) showed how line workers in an automobile factory could learn technical skills through analysis of their own work processes. Attending specifically to the learning aspects of communities of practice, some scholars have explored how the community-of-practice concept might translate into changed practices of schooling and training.

These community-of-practice approaches to learning contrast sharply with the dominant official approaches to preparing youth for economic participation. Most countries' training programs are organized around credentialing systems in which students climb a *ladder of skills*. Skills are often taught in a decontextualized manner, separate from whatever on-the-job practice may also be offered. In northern Europe's dual systems of youth apprenticeship, for example, the school rather than the workplace has most of the responsibility for teaching specific skills. Furthermore, the focus of most training systems is primarily on preparation for the future. As a result, the here-and-now productivity that characterizes youth-led organizations and other communities of practice is sacrificed. Worse yet, the skills learned in the school or training center are often mismatched to the labor market. Consequently, young people participate in training programs – whether under official school or other sponsorship (arrangements differ by country) – and then often find that there are no jobs for them. The de facto message to marginal young people may be that society does not really intend for them to join. In some other cases, youth understand that they are likely to get jobs if they earn their diplomas, but they do not believe their training is really relevant for those jobs. This can have two consequences: boredom and lack of commitment during their training years, and then lack of cognitive reflective resources during their later professional practice (Perret & Perret-Clermont, 2001).

### **Communities of Practice for Youth and Adults**

A focus on youth alone will give us only a very partial view of what kinds of practices and policies might smooth the path to productive adulthood for young people. Fragmented social conditions indeed create new conditions for the young. But it is worth noting that the new conditions in which adults are living may be part of the reason that so many youth are having such a difficult time joining society. Fragmented conditions for adults incur secondary consequences for youth development: Social roles, identity

figures, significant others, and social feedback networks are changing, sometimes vanishing. This means that gray zones exist not only in the economic and social spaces that youth inhabit but also in the symbolic space that they occupy. In some cases, these gray zones are vacuums where the young subsist in a cultural no-man's land, with no significant interlocutors; no meaningful frames of reference for values, norms, and ideals; no collective practices or stimulating discourses, exchanges, and thinking. Under these conditions, the *symbolic resources* (Zittoun, 2001) of the young are likely to be scarce, their affiliation moves anchored only in short-term relationships, and their opportunities to link past and present experiences poor and unarticulated.

The gray zones discussed throughout this volume can be viewed as the laboratory of the future, allowing the crafting of new interpersonal relationships, the definition of new roles and intergenerational relations, the development of new practices for daily life as well as for cultural, learning, or work activities, for the emotional repair or destruction of disturbed self-assertive and socialization processes. They are in themselves forces of neither good nor evil, but rather *open spaces* either for creativity or for brainwashing experiences (Rouleau-Berger, Hundeide, this volume). The *desinstitutionalization of life paths* (Meghnagi, this volume) can open opportunities to those for whom traditional norms and institutions inhibit creative adaptation. At the same time, unstructured gray zones can augment the risks for the most fragile persons and statuses.

Under which conditions can social and symbolic gray zones be places for constructive creativity both for individuals and for communities? And when are they destructive of personal and collective agency? In their illustrations of the interdependency between cognitive and identity processes, between meaning making and self-esteem, both Carugati and Rijsman (this volume) make clear the important role of relational and social frames. The young develop their minds and their understanding of themselves and of wisdom (Staudinger, this volume) throughout their personal history of encounters with others in learning activities. Perriault (this volume) describes the interdependency of these life experiences in the case of the learning to use ICT tools. For these learning moments to be fruitful, they have to take place in contexts that are sufficiently sheltered to offer security. Trial and error, a crucial mode of learning, can be carried out only if the risks of vital physical or symbolic damages (e.g., for health, face saving, identity, affiliation, school success) are contained.

It is interesting to note that, in the examples reported by Heath from youth-based organizations, the successes seem to have relied in part on

the notable commitments of older peers to protect younger members from social acts that would damage their social survival. These individuals create in-group discipline and present it as training to become a responsible person: that is, someone capable of successfully confronting the need to coordinate personal goals with the outside norms of real life. These older peers become authority figures. They gain their power in the in-group by their capacity to meet the needs of their young partners and to offer them identification figures and affiliation paths, as well as their capacity to receive outside recognition for their successful ventures.

The outside plays a crucial role in youth-based organizations, providing them with recognition via mediating adults who maintain a frame of security for the organization itself in its relationships with the wider society (e.g., housing of the activities, presenting a public image via the media, maintaining relations with the police and other formal or political institutions). The power relationships, and the negotiation processes between these mediating adults and the young organizers, are very subtle and crucial processes (Palmonari, 1987) that deserve more attention, both for their role in the successes and failures of youth-based organizations and for the light they might shed on other institutions that seem presently to be losing contact with the younger generations: trade unions (Tannock, this volume), political parties, mainstream religious congregations, and even some parts of the dual vocational training systems of Germany, Switzerland, and other northern European countries.

The creative gray zone offered by youth-based organizations goes beyond peer relationships and the mixture of security and feedback from "outside" reality that they provide. These organizations also privilege certain forms of discourse as an activity of reflection on individual and collective practice. Youth-based organizations are not alone in providing such opportunities, and much depends on the match between young people's experiences at home or in other informal settings and what they encounter in the outside world. Kaiser's examples (this volume) are cases of discrepancies between the youngsters' discourses and the learning/teaching practices in which they are immersed in school, with consequent inhibition of their feelings of self-esteem and personal agency. Säljö and Tudge (this volume) also treat the school as a potentially nurturing space for reflective discourse but suggest that reflection can be more or less consonant with real-life experience. The (relatively) sheltered opportunities offered by school for some trial and error and reflection exercises can support acquisition of semiotic tools and competencies, but these may not transfer easily to daily or professional life contexts.

Each move from formal to other settings seems to require new meaning-making processes because the move from one context to another changes significant references. For Middleton (this volume), different settings imply different cultures of discourse to which the incomer has to be socialized. In other words, as Carugati states in his chapter, the move is not only (or perhaps not even primarily) a change from a lower stage of understanding to a higher one, but also a lateral move from one cultural setting proper to a given community of practice to another cultural setting pertaining to another collective practice. In an open and complex (and ever-changing) society, the young must be socialized into several communities of practice at the same time, not withstanding the possible contradictions between the ways of doing and the ethos of these various communities (Cesari Lusso, 2001). Only the development of reflective skills over these conflicting demands can foster adaptation capacities, both at the practical and symbolic levels, and permit creative adjustment to these sometimes divergent communities of practice.

These reflective skills seem to be born in interactive processes (Perret-Clermont & Nicolet, 2001; Resnick, Levine, & Teasley, 1991; Carugati and Heath, this volume). They do not develop accidentally, however, but must be deliberately cultivated in planned *thinking spaces* (Perret-Clermont, 2000) under the coaching of peers or adults who assume specific roles in framing the discussion, giving the floor, involving peripheral participants, protecting the dignity of participants, and keeping the discussion on point. This last function calls for a deep understanding of the issues under discussion as well as well as of the symbolic tools specific to different domains of discourse. As Säljö makes clear, this development of discourse tools and processes has been the traditional role of schools. Even in the dual systems of vocational training that give major weight to work involvement and hands-on learning, a very important role is granted to the professional schools. Yet these schools are not always well adapted to their intended role in developing reflective discourse among youth, which leaves a large void in the overall experiences of young people. Experience in helping the young in their transition from school to work helps to reveal the dimensions that present formal education seems to leave unmet (Zittoun, this book).

Families are yet another setting in which young people may learn the discourse skills that will help them shift to adult roles. In family discussions, children and youth often practice the speech behaviors and types of discourse that characterize asymmetrical relationships. Pontecorvo (this volume) shows how this can work around the family dinner table, while Hofer (this volume) describes mother-daughter interactions. In both cases,

the discursive activity of the young entails not only cognitive and linguistic learning, as well as emotional and cultural socialization, but also a dynamic process of negotiation and renegotiation of the nature of the relationship, the adolescent's role, and mutual expectancies. In youth-based organizations, at work, in schools, or in the family, the young will learn to take responsibilities in an autonomous, skillful, and socialized way only if given flexible and safe opportunities to negotiate step by step, and with the necessary support, their advancement in participation, reflection, and accountability. This implies, in all these places, a space for discourse, debate, decision making, and feedback from outer reality.

What is meant here by "feedback from outer reality"? As noted earlier, the young seem to seek full social status and a sense of personal agency via the desire to be productive. Having an impact on the outside world, seeing the fruit of one's labors and not just receiving the traditional social gratifications given to children (e.g., praise from parents, marks given by teachers, diplomas conferred by schools), are experiences longed for by adolescents. Yet our capitalist societies allocate to youth mostly a place as consumers. In order to occupy this position, some young people invest their energy in earning money as early as possible, entering the labor (sometimes gray) market at almost any cost (e.g., dull work, low pay, terrible schedules, no on-site training). Being productive comes to mean nothing more than earning money when, as we have seen, there are much broader, socially generous meanings of productivity that can attract the energy and loyalty of young people.

Fouquet's, Ryan's, and Popadić's contributions to this volume make it clear that the transition pathways followed by the young are not only the result of education and self-expectancies but also are framed largely by institutional structures that differ substantially from one country to the next in the status they grant to the young, in the age of involvement in various activities, and in the kind of support they offer. Given this variety of situations internationally, the conditions exist for a set of *natural experiments* investigating how transitions to productive adulthood can best be managed. What are the opportunities for discourse and reflection that transform these transitions into learning opportunities (Perret-Clermont & Zittoun, 2002)? How do individuals and institutions adapt to the structural changes occurring around them? Above all, what happens in the gray zones in which society at large, and the young themselves, develop and test possible futures? If research of these kinds occurs over the next few years, we will be able to have a much more optimistic discussion of joining society the next time scholars are convened to address this crucial set of issues.

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