

Youth Researchers of the World, Unite!

James Côté: *Youth Studies. Fundamental Issues and Debates*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 262 pp. ISBN 978-0-230-36845-3.

Canadian youth researcher James Côté has written a thought-provoking textbook directed at students but worth reading for more experienced scholars as well. The volume aims to furnish readers with key concepts and ideas of multidisciplinary youth studies by identifying contemporary “fissures and fractures” of the field, and by opening up both long-standing and more recent debates among youth researchers. One of the most notable divisions within youth studies is the one between sociology and psychology that is reflected in the concepts used in the disciplines: while psychologists talk about adolescents, sociologists

refer systematically to young people. A social psychologist by discipline, Côté is aware of the discord and this is reflected in his writing.

Furthermore, as the title of the book promises, it aims to map the foundations of competing paradigms and schools in youth research and refers to three sets of assumptions that divide the field. These assumptions involve ontological beliefs (nominalism – realism), political agendas (critical – conservative) and value-priority stances towards young people (liberations – emancipation – guidance – control). The assumptions and labels presented in the beginning of the book are revisited in the chapters that follow, in order to characterize individual studies on young people and to explicate the roots of scholarly disputes. This abundance of perspectives may seem puzzling, but Côté asserts that the major objective of the book is to contribute to critical thinking to help decide which of the competing theories, assumptions and arguments offer the strongest justifications and most persuasive evidence in a given case.

The book consists of twelve chapters, of which the first three preface the rest of the book, by providing an outline of the seminal concepts and debates within

the field. The chapters that follow introduce topics and debates that cut across disciplines, such as education and work and youth culture. Identity is discussed in two separate chapters, “to show how academics are often talking past each other [...] in the sense that they are often actually referring to different types of phenomena, in this case ‘identity’ as it is manifested at different levels of analysis”. The decision of choosing certain extensively introduced disputes as case studies allows for a thorough reflection of the debates as well as strict criticism of certain scholars. In the chapter introducing the Eriksonian model of youth-identity formation and its postmodernist challengers, Côté presents meticulous analysis of both viewpoints. Although he grants some merit to the criticism, it becomes remarkably clear that he is not impressed with postmodernist claims of identity as inevitably fragmented and forever fluid. He refers to them as “misconceptions” and “old wine in new bottles”, misled by the “postmodernist fanfare of culture studies”.

According to Côté, the abundance of standpoints within the multidisciplinary field of youth studies is a potential barrier to developing a mature discipline. He argues that the disputes, together with the “imperialistic tendencies of some theorists”,

can hold back the field. The very same disputes, however, can help the field develop, if the various approaches are treated as a “carefully assembled collage”, and if researchers are willing to step out of their academic silos and comfort zones to look for areas of co-operation. They should start by reading the work of those in competing disciplines. Thus, Côté can be seen as a supporter of reflexivity and “slow science”, ideas that are at risk in a scientific world permeated by a preoccupation with quick fixes. He argues that such a mature field would be better able to identify strong and weak components of competing theories and find constructive resolutions to better understand questions on young people. This would benefit not just “career-minded academics” but also young people and the adults around them. These points make the book useful also to scholars working in other multi- or interdisciplinary fields than that of youth studies.

Throughout the book there is a refreshing neo-Marxist undertone, manifested as harsh criticism towards capitalism and neoliberalism, a theme which is familiar from some of Côté’s earlier writings. He advocates a political-economy-of-youth perspective, which sees young people as a special kind of class that is being manipulated as

consumers and workers, and seeks to explore the root causes of this age-specific marginalization. Although he does not aim to push the political-economy-of-youth perspective as a grand theory for youth studies, he argues that ignoring the material and social conditions of young people carries the risk of youth research providing “apologies” for neoliberalism. He cites Maysoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock, who claim that the so-called “positivity imperative” – the biased aim to defend young people against negative stereotypes thus promoting only positive stereotypes – may downplay the role of neoliberalism, which benefits from the prolongation of youth in the creation of cheap labour and large consumer markets.

Côté points out, citing two Finnish scholars – Helena Helve and Gunilla Holm – that since English is the lingua franca of academia, it “has tended to define the field internationally”. However, from the list of Côté’s own references, it seems that it is not only research written in English but research conducted by native English speakers that appears to define the field. Similarly, some of the chapters describing debates within youth studies rely heavily on articles written by native speakers (often male scholars) and sampled from the UK-based Journal of

Youth Studies. Respectively, the Nordic journal *Young* is conspicuous by its absence in the list of references. Youth studies, even when intended to be international, may sometimes appear as a spectator sport for us non-native speakers.

The book is not very concerned with gender or ethnicity as dividing forces in the lives of young people, and this could be seen as one of its limitations. However, to a certain extent it is understandable that the primary focus of the book is on youth status, and “general” youth studies. Côté does urge readers to ask how much youth status cuts through other statuses. The volume also contains plenty of ideas and suggestions for future studies that again may benefit both students and established youth researchers.

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