Review Article

Finding Youth:
Exploring Theory and Experiences of Youth
in Late Modern Societies

Gill Jones
Youth

Pat O’Connor
Irish Children and Teenagers in a Changing World –
The National ‘Write Now’ Project
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Katharina Swirak
Research Officer
Civil society, youth and youth policy in modern Ireland –
an IRCHSS funded project, University College Cork

Young people’s experiences of growing up in late-modern societies and the implications of deep social transformations for the conceptualisation and understanding of ‘youth’ as a theoretical category are among the main areas for debate in youth studies. Many youth sociologists, like so many other social scientists, have been stimulated by the catalytic concepts of the ‘risk society’ (Beck 1992), ‘reflexivity’ (Giddens, 1991) and ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 1995) and have been investigating to what extent young people’s lives reflect or provide evidence of these relatively novel social theories. Their respective deliberations often conclude with divergent and context-specific interpretations. Some highlight young people’s ability to transcend traditional categories such as class, gender and race and claim that their identities are predominantly expressed through global lifestyles and consumption (Maffesoli, 1996). Others argue that within the framework of fundamental social change, young people’s choices are still – at least partially – constrained and shaped by social structures (Furlong and Cartmel 2006; Wallace and Kovatcheva, 1998). Although the two books under review in this article are approached from fundamentally different angels in terms of scope and approach, it is within this ‘middle-ground’ that they can both be
located. Gill Jones’s important work aims to re-evaluate the significance and meaning of a wide range of social theories and their relationship with the concept of ‘youth’. While underpinning her arguments by empirical studies, mainly from the UK and the US, the book’s contribution lies in a re-positioning and re-assertion of the concept of ‘youth’. In *Irish Children and Teenagers in a Changing World*, Pat O’Connor conducts a ground-breaking and detailed analysis of thousands of written texts of Irish children and teenagers with the aim to investigate ‘whether and to what extent the self has become a reflexive project amongst young people’ (p. 154), with a particular emphasis on gendered identities in late modern Ireland.

To the traveller who is embarking on the journey to comprehensively trace the key theoretical debates which shape our understanding of the concept of ‘youth’ in late modernity, Gill Jones offers a compass to navigate through the inter-disciplinary maze of youth studies. Given Professor Jones’s longstanding background in youth research, this book seems to be mirroring what has also characterised her academic and research career: contributing to social policy debates which affect young people in very real ways in their daily lives, while simultaneously shaping theoretical debates in the field of youth studies.

Before reviewing the core aspects of the book and its potential to throw light on the Irish context, it is worthwhile to consider Jones’s conceptual and analytical approach to the volume, which significantly differentiates it in ambition and scope from most other youth studies books.

Firstly, Jones does not focus on one area of life of young people (work, health, family) or on debates within one theoretical strand of youth studies (transition, sub-cultural), but aims to evaluate whether broader developments within social theories in a late-modern context ‘can help inform current constructions of the concept of youth or prompt a process of reconstructions’ (p. 27). In doing so, she maintains a central focus on the theoretical concept of youth throughout the book, trying to demonstrate how youth has to be re-embedded and understood in broader social contexts and structures. By doing so, she successfully manages to construct a counter-debate to the popularly used deficit construction and culture of blame regarding young people, as well as to the neo-liberal assertions of the empowered individual:

> Young people are blamed for many things, which is why I have not succumbed to the prevailing political correctness of stressing young people’s agency, but instead questioned the extent to which they can as individuals and collectives, be held responsible for their actions (p. 172).

Secondly, Jones applies the theoretical discussions in each chapter to very current youth phenomena (for example youth activism and music styles) with the aim of showing whether these can be meaningfully understood and explained by the respective social theories. Thirdly, she succeeds in linking the theoretical debates to policy analysis and recommendations based on research undertaken within the British context, demonstrating how underlying assumptions rooted in social psychology and economics, rather than sociology, dominate policy formulations, thus often neglecting lived realities of young people. With these latter two strategies, she manages to enrich a theoretical book with very lively debates that also clearly resonate with issues around youth in contemporary Ireland.
After shortly outlining the development of the social construction of youth in her introductory chapter, she sketches the debates that have characterised academic discussion of youth (science or nature; age/generation or social class; conflict or consensus; structure or agency/process, contributors or dependants), and as a result distils the broad conceptual themes (action, identity, transition, inequality and dependence) that form the core chapters to follow. To anybody who is new to the field of youth studies, this first chapter offers a comprehensive overview of the main debates which have dominated youth studies over the past decades.

Investigating how the longstanding sociological agency-structure debate is relevant for young people, the second chapter ‘Youth as Action’ argues that young people are often unjustifiably ascribed unlimited individual agency by public discourse and social policy. This argument can well be extended to Ireland, if one thinks for example of the blame discourse surrounding the introduction of ASBOs in 2001, youth crime and general stereotyping of young people (Devlin, 2006). Similarly, her call for greater use of sociology in evidence based social policy formulation aimed at young people, rather than ‘efficiency’-based sciences, could also be well extrapolated to the Irish situation, where ‘new public management’ discourses dominate much of the social policy debates (Kirby, 2006).

In the next chapter, ‘Youth as Identity’, Jones considers ‘changing theories of self and identity in relation to youth and young people’ (p. 58). She proposes that theories of reflexivity with their origins in symbolic interactionism offer an alternative to postmodern debates on the relationship between self and society, which according to Jones, ultimately end in a ‘blind conceptual alley’ (p. 71). Ultimately, she adopts a middle-ground position, arguing that young people in late modernity change identities over time in a ‘continuous project of self’ (p. 83) rather than fixed by adulthood in the manner described by Erikson (1965) or free-floating as proposed by Baumann (1995). As will become evident later in this essay, Pat O’Connor comes to a very similar conclusion for young people in the Irish context.

In the chapters that follow, Jones moves her analysis to the impact of state institutional structures on young people’s lived experiences. A chapter on ‘Youth as Transition’ demonstrates how social policies for young people, particularly around education and social welfare, are designed according to linear life-stage models. These she argues don’t capture young people’s lived experiences, particularly given extended and sometimes complex school-to-work and domestic transitions. Differentiating between ‘slow and fast-track transitions’ and arguing that ‘risk’ is unevenly distributed, she demonstrates how social class, gender and ethnicity continue to influence young people’s life transitions. A look at the often contradictory definitions of young people in Irish welfare and social policy (see for example Kilkelly, 2008) could lead us to a similar conclusion as Jones’s in the British context: ‘Youth has never been successfully incorporated into UK policy thinking’ (p. 89).

In her chapter on ‘Youth and Inequality’, Jones sets out to identify to what extent structures of inequality persist for young people in late-modern societies. She points out the difficulties in measuring inequality among young people, due to their often hidden and semi-independent position in the family at different stages of their life cycle. Jones argues for considering identities, cultures and interests as important factors in the analysis of inequalities particularly amongst young people. In this
respect, her recurring criticism of the neglect of the impacts of social and cultural capital in reproduction of social inequalities amongst policy makers, seems to be applicable to the Irish context as well, if we think for example of the impacts that the re-introduction of tuition fees at third level institutions will have on non-traditional students.

In the penultimate chapter on ‘Youth and Dependence’, Jones demonstrates how age structures which arbitrarily differentiate dependence and independence, in both private and public spheres, put particular groups of young people at risk. Based on research from England and Wales, which demonstrates that most parents don’t necessarily feel responsible for offering support to their children during extended transitions from dependence to independence, she demands that any formulation of policy must recognise that ‘family resources are not equally distributed…that cultural beliefs affect the legitimacy of claims for support…[and] that family bonds could be strengthened by supporting a reciprocal relationship between young people and their parents’. The fact that Jobseekers’ benefit has been halved for claimants under 20 years of age in the most recent Irish budget cuts (Irish Times, April 8, 2009) demonstrates the underlying assumption of the availability of family support to young people, which is however not always given.

In her final chapter, Jones draws together the different strings of her book, to firmly demonstrate the social connectednesses of young people in society. She postulates a new theoretical framework for youth studies in the late modern age, arguing for the inclusion of different social sciences into youth studies, and particularly emphasises the need to re-focus on the social. Both throughout the book and in this last chapter, she offers insightful ideas which could also be useful for an Irish youth-studies agenda: firstly, youth research should concern itself with systemic analysis of structural issues that affect young people’s lives, rather than merely emphasising how young people can manage challenges. Secondly, the private spheres of young people should be taken seriously, both in research and in policy formulation, if we want to make a difference to young people’s lives. Thirdly, it is critical to identify the sources of cultural differences and investigate the differential impacts of public and private institutions on young people’s lives. Finally, she reminds us that reducing youth to age, as is often done in social policy, individualises young people, rather than understanding their particular social position as a group in society. Gill Jones manages to paint a rich canvass of the varied and complex theoretical questions that have emerged around the concept of ‘youth’ over the past decades, by offering a very dense treatment of conceptual issues, which combines theory, applied research and policy debates. This makes the book an excellent resource for students, policy makers and anybody working with young people, and reminds us all to abandon our ‘blame culture’ and remember that ‘in reality, it is young people who might lack care, or at least compassion, and who might be at greater and more immediate risk’ (p.182).

Many of the issues taken up in Jones’s book, but particularly her analysis of young people’s identity formation and persistent influences of gender cultures on young people’s lives, are also being acted out in contemporary Ireland and form the core of Pat O’Connor’s study Irish Children and Teenagers in a Changing World. O’Connor analyses a unique dataset, obtained from the national Write Now project which, on the occasion of the Millennium, invited young people in over three and a half thousand
Irish schools to write a page describing themselves and their lives. The book explores the ways in which rapid social, economic and cultural changes in Ireland are reflected in young people’s constructions of their identities. O’Connor’s timely study draws upon the rich evidence provided by young people’s voices, providing an empirical rather than speculative account of the fundamental shifts which have taken place in Ireland over the last decade or so.

A stratified random sample of 4,100 pieces of text (and in many cases drawings, song lyrics, poems), selected from young people in Fifth Grade in First Level (aged between 10-12 years) and in Transition Year in Second Level (aged between 14-17 years) served as the basis for quantitative and qualitative textual analysis. The main themes of the study were initially determined by a quantitative analysis of the texts, which distilled topics such as family, friends, school, descriptions of self, hobbies and activities, pets, family roots, the future and current affairs as recurring themes in young people’s lives. School class groups (and indirectly approximate age) and gender were the only independent variables available for analysis. The qualitative analysis of O’Connor’s study is based on these themes as well as additional themes she theorises around literature on identity in late modernity. Based on this foundation, O’Connor pursues the study by drawing upon key concepts of global/local, doing boy/girl and individualisation/structural embeddedness, allowing for a very systematic analysis of young people’s positioning on the ‘late-modernity scale’ in the Irish context. After having outlined the context of social change in Ireland and the key concepts/indicators in the first two chapters of the book, the main analysis takes place in five chapters on different themes. By drawing upon young people’s relative closeness to family or friends, chapter three on ‘Love and Work’, explores to what extent young people’s accounts of their lives and identities reflect structural embeddedness or individualisation. Similarly, young people’s narratives of work, which O’Connor defines very broadly, including school attendance, part-time work and helping out at home, are used to comment upon the level of individualisation. Her findings, as she puts it herself, are ‘both very predictable and very unexpected’. Consequently, the large majority of young people (82 per cent) referred to family settings as forming the focus of their social life. Variations existed both between age groups (with the younger age group more likely to be referring to family ties than the older age group) and between male and female teenagers. Among the older group, references to family ties were significantly more frequent amongst girls than boys (55 per cent vs 37 per cent). O’Connor goes so far as to interpret the relatively weak relational discourse of older teenage boys as a ‘bleak emotional landscape’- potentially contextualising high levels of suicide and risky behaviour amongst young Irish men. Surprisingly, much fewer young people referred to friends in their texts and less than one third of the whole sample referred to best friends. With regard to work, young people’s references to different work experiences seemed to be largely positive and they were often described and defined in the context of relationships, particularly in unpaid work. For O’Connor these results underline young people’s social connectedness, contrary to popular accounts of alienation and social anomie.

In the next chapter O’Connor is particularly effective in drawing upon young people’s biographies to comment upon how they understand and imagine their present and future lives in terms of occupational and personal choices. Basing her
analysis on a framework of three kinds of orientations to temporal discourses developed by sociologists Brannen and Nilsen (2007), she demonstrates that only the younger participants had images of a linear life course, particularly with regard to occupational ambitions. The older teenagers reflected symptoms of late modernity in their accounts by expressing self-doubt and anxieties about the future. As with Jones, O’Connor pulls out the persisting power of different gender cultures when it comes to young people’s identities. Girls tended to live in an ‘extended presence’, aiming to keep the future at bay. For the boys, she found that they expressed an exaggerated focus on ‘frantic hedonistic pleasure’ while shutting out the future. Similarly, gender differences were also evident in more frequent references to ‘contingent futures’ by girls, outlining their occupational or personal dreams. Hence, O’Connor concludes that patterns of identity with regards to biographies were ‘only to some extent typical of late modern society’, particularly for the younger cohort in the study (p. 77).

In the next chapter, O’Connor’s findings with regards to spatial discourses confirm a new emerging consensus, namely that the global finds specific re-articulations on the local level, while the latter is not simply overridden (Massey, 2005). Thus, she identifies that almost two thirds of young people in the study (63 per cent) referred both in their texts and in their drawings to their local area, in terms of location, available facilities, but also ‘local historical and material artefacts’ (p. 80). With regard to global indicators, the study identified that the main references were made to personal experiences or aspirations of travelling/living abroad and in terms of entertainment/sports culture - and here particularly geared towards the UK (for boys) and the US (for girls). A concern about global issues such as environmental hazards existed only to a very limited extent and were mostly referred to by the older boys ‘with some of them indicating a sense of impotence, global responsibility and a latent sense of despair’ (p. 87).

In the next two chapters, O’Connor discusses multiple aspects of narratives of the self and issues around lifestyles. By looking at modes of reflexivity, such as a search for authenticity, references to internal emotional states and role models, she again identifies interesting gender differences between girls and boys. Thus the establishment of hierarchical dominance was most important to boys, while issues of connectedness were most important to girls. Similarly, the social commentaries were mostly written by young men, which O’Connor interprets as reflections of hegemonic male discourse. The importance of ‘doing gender’ is also reflected in her analysis of young people’s lifestyles, such as participation in sports, music, other cultural media and shopping ‘with global phenomena being drawn on selectively to reinforce ways of doing boy/girl’ (p. 126).

Read in conjunction then, both books under review here shed light on the complexities of young people’s lived realities in late modern societies. Pat O’Connor’s study lets the voices of young people speak for themselves and thus provides us with a detailed insight into growing up in an Irish society which has undergone radical changes. O’Connor embeds each chapter in a theoretical framework that illustrates the importance of the respective themes in relation to the formation of young people’s identities and also provides reference to comparable studies from other contexts. In doing so, her study delivers an excellent read for anybody interested in young people’s identity formation in general and the Irish context in particular. Her ‘cultural analysis of reflexive constructions of self’ also allows us to gain a deeper understanding of some
of the specific social problems, such as high levels of suicide, alcohol and drug consumption, which prevail amongst young people in Ireland. Her conclusions are then very nuanced: while she finds sufficient evidence to argue that the sense of self of Irish young people has become a reflexive project, she also presents evidence which demonstrates that individualisation has not taken place to such an extreme level as some might argue. Ascribed relationships still played a major role in young people’s lives and locality still penetrated their accounts. Above all though, O’Connor successfully demonstrates that for the upcoming generation, older patriarchal structures still seem to be active in shaping the outlook and experiences of young people’s lives.

As has become evident, several of the decisions taken in recent months by the Irish government aiming to deal with the economic crisis will particularly affect young people and children. Having grown up in a predominantly booming (if also unequal) society, it will be interesting to follow how these changes will affect young people’s narratives and their sense of self, as told and analysed in Pat O’Connor’s study. It will also be an important task for youth researchers, policy makers and practitioners to pay close attention to whether and how some of the inherent tensions in the social position of young people that Gill Jones elaborates on in Youth will become further exacerbated by the present crisis.

References