The Changing Semantics of Youth and Adulthood

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ABSTRACT
This article analyses a contradiction: while living up to a selective image of youth has become imperative for the maximization of life chances, doing so attracts the discursive misrecognition of young adults’ personhoods. This cultural evaluation evinces a misapprehension of the meaning of adulthood whose increasing ambiguity is inseparable from changes in the semantics of ‘youth’. I begin by analysing the normative model ‘standard adulthood’ from a recognition-theoretical perspective and then outline transformations in the semantics of youth that undermine that model’s empirical validity. I argue further that labour and commodity markets have ‘liberated’ youthfulness from its biological, age-determined delimitations and have recast select, desirable (i.e. profitable) characteristics of youth as necessary for the maximization of individuals’ life chances. I conclude that the normative foundations of contemporary adulthood are ambiguous because the market has appropriated, altered and then sold back to us the dream of eternal youth.

KEY WORDS
adulthood/ age/ generation/ life course/ life stages/ recognition-theoretical perspective/ semantics of youth

Introduction
Adulthood is under-theorized in sociology. This is remarkable if we consider the vast literature on those ‘life-stages’ the social imagination envisages as adulthood’s before and after. The literature on childhood is extensive and social gerontology is today a core component of the sociological enterprise. Adulthood is most prominent in the sociology of youth where it figures primarily as the destination of ‘youth transitions’ or is understood to be
comprised of several destinations reached at various times – sooner by some, later by others depending on origins and opportunities (Pollock, 2008). The transitions from school to work, from the parental home to a place of one’s own and from singledom to coupledom are today subject to considerable fragmentation, stops, reversals and parallel trajectories (Bradley and Devadason, 2008; Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005; Pilcher et al., 2003; Pollock, 2008; Walther, 2006). For some, such changes augur a new life-stage, ‘emerging adulthood’, between adolescence and full adult status (e.g. Arnett, 2004). Like all attempts to conjure discrete life-stages, this not only imagines a concreteness that the conception lacks in lived experience, but posits a particular kind of adulthood as a normative good inherently worth pursuing. And as well we might. For 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 and normative assumptions about adulthood as the social destination to youth transitions. This article is a contribution to such rethinking.

Although I am aware of the problematic differentiation between adulthood as the ‘middle stage’ of the life course and later life – not least because of the infantilizing uses to which the concept ‘adulthood’ can be put (Hockey and James, 1993) – the following discussion is provoked by a widely held belief among commentators and social researchers that young people increasingly reject the responsibilities and commitments that come with adult independence (e.g. Cote, 2000; Furedi, 2003; Furstenberg, 2004). This assumption has a long history in the social sciences. We need only think of Blox’s (1941) ‘post-adolescence’, Parsons’s (1942) ‘structured irresponsibility’, or Erikson’s (1968) ‘prolonged adolescence’. This is also the locus of a contradiction which I will attempt to unpick in this article: while youthfulness has become a social and cultural imperative of sorts we are quick to judge those who engage in reputedly youthful practices as prolonging a stage of irresponsibility and dependence and so delaying their adulthood. Headlines such as ‘Forever Young Adultescents Won’t Grow UP’ (MX Australia, 2004) are illustrative of this drift. Such sentiments give expression to a ‘normative lag’: young people are supposed to ‘settle down’, yet contemporary structural and cultural conditions demand mobility and flexibility. In other words, traditional norms about adulthood remain largely robust while the context for the practical realization of these norms has changed. The context has changed to such an extent, in fact, that we are witnessing a shift from adulthood as a goal to youth as a value. The aim of this article is the conceptual elaboration of this shift.

I proceed as follows. First, I situate historically the extant normative model of adulthood and analyse it from a recognition-theoretical perspective. The key point here is that the achievement of adulthood depends on social recognition. For that social recognition to be extended to individuals they must fulfil certain validating criteria. I suggest that members of the post-1970 generation seek to create their adult lives in fast-changing conditions, but against the backdrop of
a slow-changing normative model – ‘standard adulthood’ (Lee, 2001). As a consequence, I argue, they are subject to a ‘recognition deficit’. Second, I outline a transformation in the semantics of youth that undermines the empirical validity of standard adulthood and so is one of the cultural drivers of normative changes: labour and commodity markets have ‘liberated’ youthfulness from its biological, age-determined delimitations and have recast select, desirable (i.e. profitable) characteristics of youth as necessary for the maximization of individuals’ life chances. As one consequence, ‘settling down’ becomes anathema to the image of a successful life: the liminality once attributed to youth is becoming a quality of contemporary adulthood. Third, I suggest that this process amounts to a semantic de-differentiation of youth as it becomes a lifestyle for all ages. I conclude that the normative foundations of contemporary adulthood are ambiguous, not least because the market has appropriated, altered and then sold back to us the dream of eternal youth.

Standards, Social Change and ‘Adult Recognition’

Ideas about adulthood, of what it means to be a ‘grown up’, are entrenched in the social imaginary. Emerging in the immediate post-Second World War period, particularly in the newly affluent anglophone societies, ‘standard adulthood’ was strongly linked with stability (Lee, 2001). Then the meaning of maturity, with its biological connotation of full development and its psychological associations with self-realization, were synonymous with the ‘classic markers of adulthood’: marriage, parenthood, independent living and gainful employment (Blatterer, 2007). Social achievements such as these congealed around the notion of adulthood at a time when these increasingly came to constitute realizable achievements for a majority. There were, of course, exceptions. But to point out that transitions in that reputed ‘Golden Age’ (Hobsbawm, 1995) were frequently non-linear, as becomes evident when micro-analyses are undertaken (Goodwin and O’Connor, 2005; Vickerstaff, 2003), does not detract from the fact that even for those who found the actualization of the classic markers of adulthood more difficult than others, these nonetheless represented the normative social expressions of a mature adult identity, which, moreover, were expected to be achieved in the narrow age-band of one’s early to mid-20s (Pullum et al., 2002).

As has been well documented, the context in which standard adulthood crystallized was marked by relative economic stability, labour market policies geared towards security and full-time work and a far-reaching value consensus concerning gender roles, sexuality and family formation (Beck, 2000; Harvey, 1989; Hobsbawm, 1995; Lee, 2001; Marwick, 1999). Although usage of ‘adulthood’ as a summary term for the achievements of maturity on both a psychological and social level gained currency in the early part of the 20th century (Jordan, 1978), it was under the newly stable conditions of the immediate post-war years that it became the developmental benchmark. More specifically,
while the word ‘adulthood’ has about a 130-year history in the English-speaking world ([Oxford English Dictionary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxford_English_Dictionary), 1989: 178–80), it only became a full-fledged social representation, with all the evaluative and differentiating power it now has ([Hockey and James](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3761336), 1993), once a crucial convergence of a complex of ideas and economic and political developments had occurred. By the middle of the 20th century, assisted by advice literature, management texts, movies and the fast growing self help genre, the notion of psychosocial development had become common sense. At the same time, increasing affluence, mobility and strong labour markets enabled the psychological vision of development - now translated as ‘success’ - to be made socially legible ([Illouz](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20779774), 2008). The classic markers of adulthood became crucial to that new cultural vocabulary expressing what it meant to be a ‘mature’ man or woman. This in turn facilitated the solidification of an institutionalized, strongly normative, life course ([Kohli](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20779774), 1986) with standard adulthood as its centre. Before I go on to elaborate further on this social and cultural constellation a brief conceptual detour is apposite.

### Adulthood, Recognition and Social Change

From a perspective which approaches highly differentiated society as an ‘institutionalized recognition order’ ([Fraser and Honneth](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3236171), 2003: 138), the achievement of adult status in accordance with extant, positively valued prescriptions depends on social recognition. More precisely, it is not only that individuals are accorded recognition for the social realization of adult ideals, but that in so doing individuals express their recognition of institutional and cultural arrangements. This is the Hegelian moment of intersubjectivity, as taken up by [Honneth](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3236171) (1996) for example. For the sake of consistency I refer to the kind of intersubjective recognition pertaining specifically to adult status as ‘adult recognition’.

Following the above discussion, practices such as early marriage and family formation, fulltime long-term (male) employment and independent living arrangements were criteria for adult recognition at a time when these were not only highly valued, but also relatively realizable. Thus, generalizing for the sake of clarity, the mid-20th century saw the synthesis of the ideals and realities of adulthood. In the process its normative status became fixed in the collective consciousness as a central pivot on which the social recognition of individual lives, and the fullness of their personhood, turns. Summarizing a more detailed thesis (see [Blatterer](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20779774), 2007: 51–65), I suggest that today the normative ideal of adulthood is in a process of redefinition which is driven by the very practices that, give credence to the ‘delayed adulthood thesis’ (i.e. the deferral of social achievements). At the same time, the equation of adulthood with full personhood in terms of the recognition of actors as ‘full partners in interaction’ ([Fraser](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20779774), 2000: 113) remains the meaningful core of adulthood as a social category. It is the very key to its political utility as a powerful differentiating concept, be it in our interactions with state institutions, at work or in everyday life. As I hope will become
clearer as I proceed, this also lifts adulthood above the assumption that it is today primarily a state of mind (e.g. Cote, 2000).

All this has ramifications for the social-scientific evaluation of contemporary trends. Researchers have pointed out that young people born after about 1970 have grown up differently, and in so doing have forged a ‘new adulthood’ of their own (Blatterer, 2007; Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; Wyn, 2004). To exemplify by way of three salient and much analysed instances, we may consider transformations in the areas of intimacy, work and consumption. First, though contested for lack of empirical evidence (Gross, 2005; Jamieson, 1998), Giddens’s (1992) thesis of a ‘transformation of intimacy’ from fixed, highly gendered and prescribed arrangements to more openness, negotiation and differentiation of forms of intimacy is surely indisputable, if we take it as a coherent statement about a diminishing empirical validity of older templates on a general scale notwithstanding competing realities on the level of everyday life (see also Bauman, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Second, the labour market of the ‘new economy’ favours those who are flexible, mobile and willing to change, and thus discriminates against those who want stability and linear, predictable work careers (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 2000; Bourdieu, 1998; Capelli, 2003; Goulquier, 2000; Sennett, 1998). Shifts from full-time to part-time and temporary work underpin these trends throughout the OECD (Campbell and Burgess, 2001). Moreover, there is some evidence that the desire for stability framed in these terms has been waning for some time (Blatterer, 2007; Bradley and Devadason, 2008; Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). Third, the consumer market is a prime mediator between the supply and demand structures of adult recognition. As I will discuss in more detail below, today the lines between what are considered age-appropriate or inappropriate consumer choices are blurred. Market relationships render the boundaries between child, adolescent and adult behaviour especially fluid (Danesi, 2003; Giroux, 2000), in the process making a strict separation of the categories ‘young’ and ‘old’ inappropriate (Blaike, 1999).

These selectively highlighted changes alone spell a need for subjective orientations, or ‘life conduct’ in Weber’s sense (see Abel and Cockerham, 1993), that enhance individuals’ chances for adult recognition under conditions that favour ‘situational living’, defined by Rosa (2003: 19) as a life that is no longer planned along a continuum that stretches from past to future, but one where ‘decisions are taken from “time to time” according to situational and contextual needs and desires’ more the idea of ‘settling down’ comes up against the structural need for and the cultural validation of situational living the better an interiorization and normalization of flexibility equips actors to deal with the conditions of recognition under conditions of advanced differentiation, i.e. in various social milieux (e.g. Bradley and Devadason, 2008). The redefinition of contemporary adulthood can thus be situated in what Gauchet (2000: 26, original emphasis) has called a ‘consecration of mobility on all levels of culture’, which in the present context leads to a fluidity and pluralization of the terms of recognition concerning a social category that for a significant period in history
has had little to do with flexibility; that has (and to a large extent still does) connoted ‘settling down’, being at ease with your place in the world, happy to commit to work and love, ready to take responsibility for yourself and especially for others.

The implication here is that the normative basis for adulthood is no longer fixed. As a consequence, ‘twenty and thirtysomethings’ (Burnett, 2003) are, as far as their adult status is concerned, subject to a normative lag that renders them damned if they do, and damned if they don’t. For, on the one hand they are required to lead unsettled lives, and especially in the labour market people are apt to receive recognition precisely for their willingness to be mobile and to embrace ‘risk’ (Beck, 2000: 67–91). Because work cannot be separated from non-work related activities, the orientation towards flexibility has consequences for intimate life (e.g. Pocock, 2003; Pusey, 2003: 47–107). But on the other hand, satisfying the requirements for flexibility elicits forms of discursive misrecognition. Charging young adults with a refusal to grow up, or with delaying their adulthood, implies that from the standpoint of the jurors (journalists, social commentators and social scientists) they have failed to reach ‘full personhood’. This recognition deficit – the tension between a discursive misrecognition on the one hand, and structural recognition on the other – is worth further investigation. In what follows I will do so through one among a number of possible lenses: a change in the semantics of youth.

**From Adulthood as a Goal to Youth as a Value**

The following is a useful orientating statement for the remainder of this discussion:

The Western mind is in love with youth. It is ultimately a hopeless love, a destructive love, a love that is easily exploited. But being love, we are convinced of its nobility, and all warnings against it go unheeded. Nothing can distract our gaze from the freshly minted faces on the magazine cover, the haughty pose of the soccer star, the bared body of the film actress. And this fascination isn’t limited to the youthful icons of popular culture; it colors every aspect of Western life, from the family to the workplace. (Creedon, 1995: 1)

This 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, so Franco Moretti (2000), 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’ (2000: 5). 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. But
by mid-20th century this ‘youth’ had begun to compete against the ideal of maturity qua standard adulthood. As consumption increasingly challenged production for pre-eminence regarding individuals’ social identities, the market channelled the tensions and began to profit from them. It still does so today. The market’s modus operandi is a semantic expansion which, rather than a life-stage, renders youth a lifestyle for all ages. At the core of youth’s semantic expansion lies a highly selective and often contradictory validation of socially constructed qualities. For instance, ‘whereas 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’ (Levi and Schmitt, 1997: 9). The difference between the developmental category adolescence and youth does some useful work in this regard. While on the one hand youth as a way of life is promulgated as desirable, the ascribed characteristics of adolescence (irresponsibility, rebelliousness, irrationality, unpredictability, present- and self-centredness) are seen as undesirable and are to be left behind. The ideal 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, is increasingly inappropriate. Experimental attitudes toward life and dreams of adventure are today no longer contrary to the status quo, but an imperative component of it. And this, crucially, challenges the notion of youth as an in-between stage with adulthood as its resolution.

**Liminality without Limits**

The social and cultural imperatives of contemporary adulthood can be further conceptualized by drawing on Van Gennep’s (1960) much used notion of liminality. According to Van Gennep, ‘rites of passage’ are marked by a trajectory from ‘separation’ from one stage to ‘aggregation’ with the next, while liminality is the in-between phase. With respect to the transition to adulthood, Victor Turner (1974: 232) famously called youth a ‘liminal stage’: being ‘neither here nor there’, neither child nor adult, youth is perceived as a state of incompleteness. Being neither here nor there, youthful liminality also means that in a world where the possibilities for long-term self-projections are increasingly foreclosed (Wyn and White, 2000) young people acquire a practical attitude of a kind that prepares them to have no expectations beyond the present, to make no commitments beyond the immediate future. As one respondent in a qualitative study of the meaning of adulthood states pithily, ‘wish-fulfilment is the death of future’ (Blatterer, 2007: 104).
Furthermore, affinities between structural conditions and cultural ideals of personal growth radically alter the meaning of liminality. As part of what Illouz (2008) has traced as the emergence of the ‘therapeutic persuasion’, Western individuals’ fascination with personal development permeates contemporary discourse (see also Furedi, 2004). A visit to the airport bookshop, the most cursory glance at TV talk shows, the perusal of popular magazines, the burgeoning field of life coaching, conversations with friends, acquaintances and family, questions fielded at job interviews (e.g. ‘How would this position enrich your life?’), will confirm that personal growth in one form or another is a dominant cultural theme. By the beginning of the 20th century the spirit of Romanticism with its insistence on a realizable, essential self had found scientific legitimation (Illouz, 2008: 22–57). By the second half of the 20th century that spirit found material form in the strongly normative social achievements of the classic markers of adulthood. By today it has found the necessary market conditions to flourish as a mass cultural form. With a short stretch of the imagination, this trend can be connected to perceptions of an open-ended future as well as the reality and perception of proliferating options (Wyn and White, 2000). I suggest that research findings showing that many young people across all borders of gender, ethnicity and class are largely optimistic about the road ahead (e.g., Arnett, 2000; Bradley and Devadason, 2008; Du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Dwyer and Wyn, 2001) can be linked to an internalization of unbounded possibilities, the actualization of which is in the main perceived as subject to individual resolve, and to individual resolve only. At the same time, this is an indication that the ability of young people actively to connect their own destinies with the social forces that shape them is diminishing, something that Furlong and Cartmel (1997) have referred to as the ‘epistemological fallacy of late modernity’. The actualization of options is individualized and personal growth, though an individual pursuit, becomes a modus vivendi. But when the idea of personal growth in its various forms becomes an action-orienting value, making once-and-for-all decisions about life makes as little sense as deciding that you have grown enough, that you have finally realized your self, reached your full potential, and so forth. Thus, rather than a ‘fallacy’, this kind of attitude is a ‘rational response’ to systemically and culturally induced uncertainty (Bauman, 2001: 52, original emphasis).

Youth conceived as resolvable in standard adulthood no longer obtains for many individuals. At the same time, to be young (at heart) matters precisely because the future is still open. That is, contrary to those who diagnose a ‘culture of the present’ (Mongardini, 1996), the future matters – and all the more so because it lacks definition. Consequently, youth as a liminal stage takes on a meaning that goes beyond the transitional qualities attributed to (biological) adolescence. When in addition to the perception of an open future and too many options the interminable process of striving for self-realization becomes a goal, adulthood can no longer retain its status as final destination; it is replaced by youth as a value. In other words, the liminality attributed to youth is becoming a quality of contemporary adulthood. But this is – emphatically – not to be
equated with a prolonged adolescence, nor with a delayed adulthood, for this kind of liminality is in one important respect at variance with Van Gennep’s notion: where his conception presupposes two states that border the liminal phase, a state that has been left behind and another that is not yet reached, the liminality of contemporary adulthood knows no limits as, while standard adulthood as the classic resolution to adolescence remains a normative model, the actual practices of contemporary young adults in current social contexts render their adulthood(s) liminal without limits. This is congruent with the fluid dynamics of recognition in the present era – dynamics in the constitution of which the market plays a significant role, and to which I now turn.

Youth, Recognition and the Market

By the 1950s the metaphysics of youth, with its origins in antiquity and revitalized in 19th-century Romanticism, had encountered its 20th-century realization. First in the USA, then in other anglophone societies, and finally in continental Europe, where the echoes of war delayed economic growth and the generalization of affluence across classes, 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 (Hine, 1999; Marwick, 1999; Savage, 2007). 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, that is, 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 culture industry not only expressed but also promoted what being young meant.

Today, the tropes and ideology of youthfulness are not only understood as desirable in their embodied sense. Elan and verve, flexibility and mobility, risk-taking, improvising and experimenting propensities, creativity and thirst for change, situational living and present-centredness, cutting-edge know-how, up-to-dateness, and beauty are cast as desirable, if not imperative, from the standpoint of employers and corporations. 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, especially since later life too has for some time now undergone a considerable, consumption-led redefinition (Blaikie, 1999). The phenomenon of ‘ageing rock stars’ (discussed below) is one example; the phenomenon of ‘grey nomads’ – older individuals who take to the road and travel throughout Australia for extended periods (and share this activity...
not with the middle-aged but mostly with young adults) – is another (Onyx and Leonard, 2007). Here too new practices strain against old models. And so the normative lag between the ideals and realities of adulthood is perhaps more than anything a boundary problem between ‘stages’ on either side of life’s continuum. The consequences of this in terms of politics, culture and the lived experience of age deserve a fuller treatment than is possible in the context of this article. Suffice it to say for now that from the standpoint of the market this quasi-democratization of consumption practices spells a de-differentiation and thus expansion of the target group. Danesi (2003: ix) comes to the point: ‘Teen tastes have become the tastes of all because the economic system requires this to be so … In a phrase, youth sells!’

This semantic expansion of youth signals a stronger integration of youth into the economic and cultural temper of the times than was the case during the three decades after the Second World War. When long-term full-time 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 (Campbell and Burgess, 2001; Capelli, 2003), when, partly as a consequence, time horizons contract (Rosa, 2003; Sennett, 1998), and when institutionalized commitments between intimates are freed from normative constraints (Giddens, 1992; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; for a critique see also Gross, 2005), flexibility, openness to change, risk-taking attitudes and short-termism do not merely constitute an affinity with structural and cultural exigencies, but also the necessary internalization and hence normalization of a stance toward life in general. It is in this context that 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

As youthfulness becomes an ethic of life per se, youth’s historical trajectory is undergoing a reversal of sorts. While the rise of teenage culture precipitated a strong cultural differentiation between the world of adults and that of teenagers, today there are explicit signs of de-differentiation, and perhaps nowhere more so than in those genres of music that are heavily invested with generational and age-coded representations. The recycling of pop music is one aspect of this intergenerational process. Remixes of hits from previous decades both cater for the nostalgic sentiments of those who were teens in the periods in which the original material first came to market, and at the same time respond to and shape the cultural sensibilities of the successor generation. A related instance is the phenomenon of rock stars who despite their biological ageing continue to ‘perform’ their youth. Once doyens of the young in their own youth, and once imbued with anti-establishment mock rage, the likes of
Mick Jagger (b. 1943) and Keith Richards (b. 1943) of the *Rolling Stones*, Pete Townshend (b. 1945) and Roger Daltrey (b. 1944) of *The Who*, Johnny Rotten (b. 1956) of the self- and industry-styled anarchic *Sex Pistols* and many of their colleagues continue to grace concert stages around the world. For critics such as John Strausbaugh (2001), they have long lost the type of credibility once attributed to them by press, peers and fans; a credibility that was anchored in rock as the quintessential cultural form framing and giving expression to what it meant to be young.

Having outlived the promise to die young and thus to live forever, today these pop icons are perhaps more than anything living ‘sites of memory’ (Nora, 1992) that link those who have biologically outgrown adolescence to their teenage years. But it is here also that Strausbaugh and others who are suspicious of ageing rock-stars’ refusal to leave the stage ignore a simple fact: the rock consumers of yesteryear have aged along with their idols; they too do not want to leave the stage (of youth) and remain the target audience (as a quick personal survey of the audience at concerts by the *Stones*, *Pink Floyd* and *Deep Purple* will confirm). Mick Jagger’s comment is apt in this context, and also articulates the ‘cultural burden’ celebrities of his ilk have to carry: ‘They want you to be like you were in 1969. They want you to, because otherwise their youth goes with you, you know’ (cited in Blaikie, 1999: 107). Biological age alone cannot determine taste. And so to suggest that rock as ‘youth music’ (Strausbaugh, 2001) should be left to the (biologically) young is also to suggest that musical styles and tastes should properly be aligned with ageing processes. However, in terms of musical styles, and ‘lifestyles’ more generally, there is today a considerable blurring of the age categories ‘young’ and ‘old’ (e.g. Blaikie, 1999), especially when compared to the deep cultural rifts between the generations so salient in the heyday of youth culture in the three decades following the Second World War. Here Strausbaugh is surely correct when he detects a general decline of youth rebellion, something that others have diagnosed as no less than ‘the disappearance of one of the cultural mainsprings of our societies during the last century’ (Gauchet, 2000: 24). There may well be connexions between this trend and the much commented upon depoliticization of young people (Henn et al., 2002) which, although they cannot be explored in this article, are certainly worth attention by cultural sociologists.

It appears then that today’s semantics of youth are strongly integrative. On the one hand, they provide a powerful ideology which naturalizes 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. On the other hand, 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 towards more openness. Schematically put, 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 of youth affects individuals’ integration into society under
prevailing conditions. But while the teenage market of the post-war era helped differentiate teenagers from the parent generation and so also further homogenized teenagers as a group, the market driven homogenization of today is manifest in the degree to which the differences between the marketable demographics childhood, youth and adulthood are smoothed over and the young/old binary is challenged. By this I emphatically do not suggest that the time of ‘tribal’ affiliations (Maffesoli, 1996) is over. The plethora of options for young people to identify with any number of political or lifestyle communities does not admit such speculation. Rather, I want to draw attention to the societal appropriation of select characteristics ascribed to youth in the broadest sense.

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, a generation that was born contingent. That is to say, by the time its members reached adolescence, a high degree of reflexivity about one’s individual biography was already taken for granted (Beck, 1992: 127–38; Giddens, 1991). As a consequence, that generation lacks the collective memory of a time when different – though not necessarily better – conditions prevailed and are thus thrown back on present-day contingencies without many of the traditional blueprints for action, but also without having the wherewithal to lay claim to these. Its members have interiorized modes of life that are most conducive to the market processes of contemporary modernity. Their performance as market actors has to a large extent determined the degree of social recognition they have been able to attain. At the same time, systemically induced dissatisfaction ensures that the quest for recognition in the marketplace remains interminable. This fits hand in glove with the centrality of personal growth as a potentially unending process of individualization. Thus Lenzen’s (1991: 45) claim that ‘youthfulness … has become the signature of a whole culture’ stands confirmed insofar as its tropes deliver a coherent and highly integrative orientation for life conduct, even though that culture is not yet wholly reconciled to some of its practical implications.

Conclusion

Contemporary transformations in the semantics of youth have 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 individualizes systemic conditions because the 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 crucial to contemporary uncertainties about adulthood, about what ‘being a grown up’ actually means and what promises it holds. Expectations of self and others – to grow up, mature, settle down, walk the line and follow the beaten path of previous generations – may help us set goals; but it may just as well give rise to often no longer realizable expectations
and then self-doubt (Blatterer, 2007). This heralds important changes on a generational scale begging further analyses. For now, one aspect can be briefly sketched. At a time when standard adulthood constituted a clearer goal than its contemporary modes can offer, leaving the well-trodden path for a time, breaking the mould and ‘dropping out’, experimenting with different lifestyles, and so forth, took place in a social environment where people also knew what path they were treading, what mould they were breaking, and what they were dropping out of and into. Flexibility in today’s terms was a lifestyle choice precisely because ‘settling down’ – whatever that may have meant for men and women and people of various cultural backgrounds and class positions – was a possibility. Today, that flexibility is a necessity and so the terms of that ‘settling down’, of that kind of adulthood, are no longer clear; its normative basis is dissolving even though ideals resist.

Simmel reminds us that ‘in all that we do, we have a norm, a standard, an ideally preconceived totality before us, which we try to transpose into reality through our actions’ (1978: 451). But as Shils notes, ‘an ideal, an ethical standard which has become established is a mortal creation’ (1981: 25). So it is with standard adulthood. The practices of contemporary young adults – varied as they are, with some following the standards and others setting new ones – are inevitably changing the way we think about this social category. They do so under rapidly changing social conditions, under market conditions that demand at least as much as they promise. Their coming of age is a ‘struggle for recognition’ (Honneth, 1996) that is marked by the pitting of new social practices against residual normative ideals. This is not a collective struggle of a self-conscious class of individuals advancing claims for social validation. Rather, as an unintended consequence of precisely those practices that render them, in the eyes of some, ‘delayers’ and ‘refusers’ of adulthood they challenge the existing recognition order, and so redefine, however slowly, the meaning of adulthood. In the final analysis, this redefinition flows mostly from people’s mundane, everyday engagements with the uncertainties of modernity.

Notes

1 Honneth’s usage of the term ‘institutionalized recognition order’ (institutionalisierte Anerkennungsordnung) pays heed to the centrality of intersubjective forms of recognition in the development and continuity of modern societies. Honneth (1996) makes a tripartite division, whereby ‘love’ connotes mutual recognition in the intimate sphere, while ‘right’ and ‘solidarity’ refer to legal and work-centred forms of recognition respectively. This division is made for analytic purposes only. As is the case with ‘adult recognition’, in the sense the term is employed here, there are empirical overlaps.

2 It is tempting here to refer to what Turner termed ‘liminoid phenomena’. I am hesitant to do so because the kind of liminality with which I am concerned differs from the liminoid as the latter refers to more or less ‘marginalized’ activities, whereas I am concerned with ‘central’ practices. Says Turner: ‘One works at the liminal, one plays with the liminoid’ (Turner, 1982: 55).
References


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