The Politics of the Newcomer

Notes on a Critical Social Theory of Youth

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Introduction: The (Political) Trauma of Childhood

A child, friend of an innkeeper named Adam, watched him club the rats pouring out of holes in the courtyard. It was in his image that the child made its own image of the first man. That this has been forgotten – that we no longer know what we used to feel before the dogcatcher’s van – is both the triumph of culture and its failure. Culture, which keeps emulating the old Adam, cannot bear to be reminded of that zone, and precisely this is not to be reconciled with the conception that culture has of itself. It abhors stench because it stinks – because, as Brecht put it in a magnificent line, its mansion is built of dogshit.

Adorno 1973, 366

The social category adolescence identifies a structural location for a human-as-socialized being. An adolescent is a specific, existing subject – a human being with an historically-situated consciousness and relation with other subjects in the social structure. Her capacity for self-actualization and self-awareness are realized through her experiences of socialization and thus subordinated to the social order; as such, the adolescent is paradigmatic of the ambivalent relation between agency and subjugation at the heart of bourgeois subjectivity (more so perhaps because of her social, political, and economic enforced-dependence on adults). Therefore, ‘adolescence’ as a class, in the sense that Marx conceptualizes the proletariat, enhances our critical goals: it is the specific and historically-determined structural position of the adolescent which enables her unique experience of the tension inherent in bourgeois subjectivity.

Critical youth studies can pose a political challenge to disciplinary, compartmentalized studies of the human condition. This confrontation is forestalled as long as we reproduce the standard methods of theorizing youth that have coalesced over the past fifty-odd years in psychoanalytic and critical social theory, methods which either bracket capitalism as ‘background’ or completely occlude the subject herself in their focus on structure. Any new directions in the study of youth must take account of the mutually-constituting, dialectical relationship between structure and subject.
In this chapter, I imagine what the political means when we actively recognize youth on their own terms. I will construct a place in which we can think critically about the young person as she lives in this historical moment, considering the historical psycho-social as well as the political-economic terms of her subjectivity. My argument is that academic works theorizing youth and youth culture must stay present to the difference between the capitalist system that must continually produce ‘victims’ (in this case, youth), and actual youth, which is something that exists, concretely and on its own, interacting with but distinct from the structural conditions which situate and produce it as an effect.

I will further suggest that we ought to attempt to imagine an alternate socialization that preserves the radical newness of young people’s consciousness. The point is not to make youth studies more utopian; I would argue that these questions are fundamental to discipline youth studies away from ideological confirmation towards responding to historically-situated problems facing young subjects.

There is a political dimension to the psycho-social study of youth, and it becomes visible in the authorial choices to define the subject (especially the idiosyncratic and ideological underpinnings of those choices). Adorno contextualizes cultural transmission even as he upsets normative conceptions of development and civilization by raising a stink about intergenerationality and ideology: under the guise of socialization, the child is only a subject-to-be. From the moment of birth, she will be subjugated, even to an idea of being a subject. But first it will begin with a shock akin to a child watching a grown man beat animals – a familial childhood trauma caused (in the least) by the incommunicability of early childhood (Rank 1929). We, too, shriek at the horrific possibility – that socialization is socialization always into a life of violence, and quickly naturalize it (Freud and Rieff 1997). By forestalling the naturalization of this process, we can begin to reflect upon psychopolitics – that is, the politics of the psycho-social development of the human condition.

With the designation the psycho-social my intention is to highlight the subordination of subject-formation to the vagaries of social reproduction. To call this process psycho-social and not psychological-and-social points up the fundamental embeddedness of the individual subject in the historic conditions that have made her subjectivity possible. Immediately, we can perceive the overlap of three dimensions of subjectivity: the psychic, the relational, and the ideational, because they correspond to the dimensions of subjectivity in which ideological subjugation is historically substantiated. The psychic dimension corresponds to the psychological and affective structure of the individual. The relational corresponds to the intersubjective, and the ideational corresponds