

Coté, J. E. & Allahar, A. L. (2006) *Critical youth studies: A Canadian focus*. Toronto: Pearson Education Canada. 176 pages. Price: \$43.95 CAD (paper).

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The premise of James Côté and Anton Allahar's excellent new book, *Critical youth studies: A Canadian perspective*, is that adolescence is not a biological period of maturation but rather a sociological construction, which has been invented by adults because of the political and economic benefits accorded to them by maintaining younger people in a subordinate position for an extended period of time. As such, the length of adolescence is subject to shifts in the socio-political landscape and now extends in Canadian society to the 25-29 year old age group. The book does not seek to be a comprehensive investigation of youth studies but rather a focused argument of how adolescence is viewed in Canada (Chapters 1-3), why it is viewed in such a fashion (Chapters 4-6), and how we might view it differently now and in the future (Chapter 7).

Rather than going through each chapter in turn, I would like to highlight three aspects of the book that proved particularly helpful for my personal understanding of the issue: the use of statistics in Chapter 3, the theme of dissent running through the fifth and sixth chapters, and the provision of alternative visions in the concluding chapter.

The numbers in Chapter 3 are simply staggering and paint a compelling picture of the condition for youth in Canada. To start, young people are being disenfranchised by their shrinking percentage in the demographic landscape. While, as recently as 1981, the median age in Canada was 29.6 and the ratio of 15-29 year olds to 30-64 year olds was .72 (male) and .70 (female), by 2001, the median age had risen to 41.3 and the ratios had dropped to .42 and .40, respectively. As well, young people continue to delay their entrance into the workforce. While 16% of women and 21% of men in the 20-24 age group were attending school full-time in 1981, those numbers had climbed to 43% and 37% by 2001. Youth were no doubt lured by the prospects offered by a postsecondary education, prospects which are best described as illusory, in that the number of highly skilled and skilled jobs are not keeping pace with the increasing credentials.

Beginning in Chapter 5 and then forming the basis of Chapter 6 is the concept of the manufacture of dissent. Although the authors' argument is too complex to summarize here, I was mostly intrigued by the way the mass media has taken over control of "identity elements" and then repackaged these elements to young consumers. It reminded me of a current television commercial where a young male rock climber with child and dog attached to his gear mocks another young male rock climber for his biceps tattoo (a now seemingly passé identity marker), all in the service of selling a motor vehicle (the new identity marker?).

Too many books might have ended with the sixth chapter. By that point, the authors have skillfully laid forth their argument that we have a youth crisis in Canada. The reader would have been left with a sense of despair that nothing could be done. Chapter 7 gives hope for solutions by describing specific practices that might be implemented in Canada, drawing heavily on the example of Sweden. By targeting fiscal and personal resources in the area, Sweden has made great strides toward including all of its citizens meaningfully in its society, including those persons who are under the age of 30. While Sweden has not been completely successful in its efforts and there is no guarantee that what works in Sweden would work in Canada, the lesson may not be so much in the strategies employed as in the concerted effort possible when a country decides that it is unacceptable to keep young people in a state of perpetual adolescence.

The book's primary weakness lies in the differential level of evidence for claims. This weakness has two facets, one of which could have been addressed by the authors, and one of which relates to the present state of Canadian youth studies. First, in certain sections of the book, the authors rely exclusively or almost exclusively on relatively dated sources to make their case. For example, the section on gender intensification in the sixth chapter (p. 109-112) contains only one reference later than 1992, although one would think that gender roles might have changed in the past 10 or more years. Similarly, the section of the second chapter delineating limitations of biology-based theories (p. 31-32) has no reference more recent than 1995. Future editions of the book might cite more current literature in the field for these and other sections. Second, there is often a tension evidenced across trends in Western society, trends in North American (usually U.S.) society, and trends in Canadian society. When no Canadian data are available to support a statement, the authors tend to use data from other similar countries. Although the authors acknowledge the problems of using such extrapolation methods (see page 73) and this limitation is not the fault of the authors, the subsequent analyses are weakened by the lack of Canadian research.

While the book is well conceptualized and very reader-friendly, a major challenge for the authors is in reaching the young people who form the focus of the book. As Côté and Allahar state in their introduction, "we have been disappointed in our lack of widespread impact on the people most affected - young people themselves. In spite of having their economic and citizenship rights seriously altered by the changes we documented 10 years ago, there seems to be a lack of a critical understanding of what lies behind the growing inequities among the age cohorts that ostensibly share equal citizenship rights" (p. xiii). The authors attempt to redress this weakness of their previous work by concluding the book with recommendations geared for young people. However, there is a dilemma here. If, as the authors propose, young people are being kept in an extended period where they are under great pressure not to exercise and develop their critical thinking skills, they can surely not be expected to engage

in a book such as this one, which clearly requires critical thinking. Yet it is engagement with just such a book that might allow young people to move out of their extended adolescence and into adulthood.

Perhaps what is required is a joint reading of this book across age cohorts to open up a shared dialogue about the issues raised. While such a reading could take place in the context of university and college courses in sociology, it could also occur across generations within a family. The ensuing debate may be heated, and some of the points the authors raise may prove controversial. Still, whatever the means and whether or not this book is used as the catalyst, we as Canadians must heed the message of the book and move out of our safety zones to make concerted efforts at changing our society to make it inclusive for all persons, regardless of age. ♣