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DOI:

[10.1080/13676261.2016.1206869](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2016.1206869)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Zucaria, M., & Tannock, S. (2016). On the Political Economy of Youth: a comment. *JOURNAL OF YOUTH STUDIES*, 19 (9), 1281-1289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2016.1206869>

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On the political economy of youth: A comment

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This article is written as a brief comment on a recent discussion that has taken place in the pages of the *Journal of Youth Studies* on the question of youth, youth studies and political economy, in a series of articles by Côté (2014, 2016) and France and Threadgold (2015). It argues for the value of embracing a broad understanding of the term political economy, and for the importance of increasing the attention paid to political economy in the field of youth studies. The comment draws on a simple review of articles published in the *Journal of Youth Studies* over a five year period between 2011 and 2015 in order to clarify the different approaches that can be taken by youth studies researchers with respect to the question of political economy.

Keywords: political economy; youth unemployment; youth studies.

In 2014, the *Journal of Youth Studies* published an article by James Côté calling for more attention to political economy in the field of youth studies. Unfortunately, the immediate follow up has been the publication of a response article by Alan France and Steven Threadgold (2015) sharply criticising the Côté piece; and a strongly worded rejoinder article by Côté (2016). The tenor has been acrimonious, focusing on (1) a perceived attack on the field of youth studies and the need to defend the value of work done here, (2) a sense of dividing the field into discrete camps that are categorically better and worse than one another, (3) an argument over the benefits and limitations of one particular way of viewing youth in contemporary global society (as a social class), and (4) a reassertion of the greater value of currently dominant theoretical frameworks and empirical approaches in the field of youth studies. We fear this exchange risks drowning out a larger point made in the original article by Côté that we would hope would find support throughout the field of youth studies, regardless of the particular topic or theory any one individual researcher's line of work tends to focus on. That is, quite simply, that there is considerable value to increasing the attention paid to political economy in the field of youth studies, particularly in the current historical conjuncture.

In this brief comment, we address first how we understand the meaning of a political economy of youth and the claim of a relative lack of political economy approaches in contemporary youth studies generally; we point to the kinds of developments in global society, politics and economy today that we believe merit more attention from youth studies analysts than they currently tend to

receive; and we use the example of youth unemployment as a way of thinking through the different levels of analysis that could and should be done as part of a political economy of youth. In all of this, we adopt the stance of “pragmatist realism,” as articulated by Wright (2015): the point is not to argue for the overall supremacy of one theoretical framework or analytic approach over another, but to suggest that different approaches have different strengths (and weaknesses) in addressing different kinds of processes, phenomena and problems in the social world. Depending on changes in broader society, and in the field of youth studies itself, there is an ever shifting need to call for greater consideration of one approach or another.

The (missing) political economy of youth

In the *Journal of Youth Studies* exchange, there are conflicting definitions of what is meant by a political economy approach to the study of youth. This was defined initially by Côté (2014, 528) as being “a perspective that investigates the root causes and consequences of the positioning over time of the youth segment in relation to those (adults) in a given society with political and economic power,” and subsequently, in his rejoinder article, as “the cause/solution project of youth proletarianization” (Côté 2016, 1). France and Threadgold (2015, 2, 9, 10, 11, 14), in their critique of Côté, refer repeatedly to the political economy approach as one that is concerned with “the relationship between the economy and the everyday life of young people,” “young people’s economic relationships,” “the relationship between the economy and the actions of the young,” and the role of “economic influences,” “economic drivers” and the “economic imperative” in framing and shaping young people’s lives.

Bearing in mind Côté’s (2014, 528) observation that political economy is a term with “multiple usages,” we suggest it is useful to adopt a broader definition than either of those above. The Political Economy Project (2015), for example, defines political economy as being an approach that:

addresses the mutual constitution of states, markets, and classes, the co-constitution of class, race, gender, and other forms of identity, varying modes of capital accumulation and the legal, political, and cultural forms of their regulation, relations among local, national, and global forms of capital, class, and culture, the construction of forms of knowledge and hegemony; techno-politics; water and the environment as resources and

fields of contestation; the role of war in the constitution of states and classes; and practices and cultures of domination and resistance.

As suggested by such a definition, political economy approaches tend to be distinguished by the relative degree of attention paid to the relationship between local settings and “the *totality of social relations* that make up the economic, political, social, and cultural areas of life,” as well as long-term patterns of “*social change and historical transformation*” (Mosco, 2009, 3-4, 26, italics in original). Consequently, as Selwyn (2013, 31) notes, “one of the key strengths of the political economy approach is its recognition of the breadth of actors and interests involved” in any given setting. Rather than presume ahead of time the value of any one theory or discipline, or the defining characteristics of any one social group, the concern is to understand how each of these are constituted and reconstituted within a broad and ever-changing set of social, cultural, political and economic relationships.

A political economy approach to youth studies, then, means being concerned with much more than a narrow focus on the relationship between the economy and the lives of young people: rather it addresses how (and whether) individuals and groups come to be constituted as “youth” in the first instance, by analysing the continuously changing nature and significance of youth as an identity, social category and ideology, in relation to the broader contexts of local, national and global culture, society, politics and economy. It also extends the focus of youth studies outward, as Selwyn (2013, 32) suggests, to consider the “activities and agendas” of a wide range of social actors. As we have written elsewhere:

To understand the significance of youth in global society, it is ... necessary to look well beyond youth and young people in and of themselves. This is not just because of the wide range of social and political actors involved in shaping the meaning and salience of youth, but also because ... [i]nvocations about youth are often made in the context of social struggles and political agendas whose central concerns may only be symbolically or indirectly connected to the lives of individual young people. (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015, 4)

A political economy approach may well generate arguments, of the kind made by Côté, that there is currently a process of “youth proletarianization” and a deteriorating position of the “youth segment” in relation to powerful and wealthy adults; but it could just as likely lead to a questioning of claims of

youth proletarianization, and an analysis of how the construction of youth/adult divides can, in some settings, be promoted by elite, conservative actors in support of their own (not very youth friendly) interests and agendas. Finally, a political economy approach to youth studies may take on any number of theoretical frameworks, including both the neo-Marxist and Bourdieusian frames favored by Côté (2014) and France and Threadgold (2015) in their respective *Journal of Youth Studies* articles. For it is a set of questions, concerns and perspectives that mark out the political economy approach, rather than the belonging to a particular camp or use of a specific nomenclature.

Thus, what does it mean to suggest that a political economy approach is underdeveloped in the field of youth studies? It certainly does not mean the field has been inattentive to the ways in which “economic forces” shape and frame the lives of young people. If one looks over the set of articles appearing in the *Journal of Youth Studies* over the five year period from 2011-2015, for example, concern with the ways in which socio-economic inequality affects young people is omnipresent, at least as a background issue. In this sense, France and Threadgold (2015, 4) are right to argue that “much youth studies work does a good job of marrying economy and subjectivity.” To some extent, the claim refers to the kinds of topics that are addressed by youth studies researchers: a simple count of the 350 articles that appeared in the *Journal of Youth Studies* between 2011 and 2015 shows the field’s continuing focus on the peer group, subculture, consumption and leisure activities of the young (over a third of all articles); only about a tenth of articles focus on young people’s experiences of employment and unemployment, while consideration of youth experience of other institutional settings (religion, the justice system, the health system, the military, etc.) is even more rare.

But really, the core concern of the critique lies elsewhere. Reading over the five year set of *Journal of Youth Studies* articles, one is struck by the narrow range of social actors that are the focus of youth research. On the evidence of these articles, one would conclude that being a youth researcher means interviewing, surveying and/or observing young people. Only rarely (about 5% of all articles) are the activities, interests and agendas of elite social actors – multinational corporations, international development organizations, high level policy makers, think tanks and foundations, trade unions and faith groups, etc. – the focus of research, despite the fact that few would dispute the enormous influence such actors have in shaping young people’s lives, as well as the nature and significance of youth more generally. Even frontline

workers with youth (teachers, social workers, youth workers etc.) are only sporadically the central subject of research attention (about 4% of all articles).

Further, in most of the *Journal of Youth Studies* articles during the 2011-2015 period, youth is taken largely as a given. In other words, the focus is on the experiences, attitudes and interests of individuals who fall within a particular (youthful) age group; much rarer is the social construction of youth itself, whether as an identity, social category or ideology, the primary analytic focus. Articles during this period also tend, to use the terminology of Thiem (2009), to adopt an inward rather than outward-looking analysis of youth in relation to the “totality of social relations.” The central question for researchers tends to be how social, cultural, political and economic contexts frame and shape the lives of young people; only on occasion is consideration paid to the question of how young people and youth (whether as an ideology, identity, political actor and/or social category) play a role in shaping, organizing or legitimating social, cultural, political and economic structures and practices generally and globally.

The current historical conjuncture

Why is it so important to focus on the political economy of youth in the current historical conjuncture? Côté (2014, 529) focuses on the “aftermath of the ‘great recession,’” that has had “severe consequences for young people,” including a “deterioration in material conditions, especially in earning power,” and growth in youth unemployment rates. We do not disagree with this argument, but would also point to a larger set of legitimating considerations. As we have argued elsewhere (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015), over the last two decades of the twentieth century and first two decades of the twenty-first century, youth has increasingly moved to the center of global policy, development, public and media debates and conflicts. It is not just that the actions of elites are impacting the lives of young people around the world, often in harmful ways; but that elites are directly and explicitly invoking youth (as an ideology, identity, social category, political actor, etc.), in order to promote policies and practices that serve their own interests and agendas, and very often impact the lives not just of young people, but people of all ages and life stages. During this period, multinational corporations, international development organizations, philanthropic foundations, national and local non-governmental organizations, nation states and local states have all embraced a wide array of youth-focused policies and programming activities. From the U.S. Department of State, to the World Bank, to the World Economic Forum, to the

European Union and beyond, a growing number of powerful actors in global society, politics and economy are training their attention squarely on the question and cause of youth.

There are a number of reasons why this shift may be happening; and there are different ways of thinking about how this era compares with the position of youth in previous eras. Our own argument is that, while there have long been close ties between the development of capitalist society and the emergence of youth as a social category, current shifts in the positioning and significance of youth worldwide are directly linked to the global rise and spread of neoliberal forms of capitalism (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015). Others may emphasize alternative or additional explanations. But key in such a historical conjuncture is the development of a broad scope when thinking about youth in global society. Youth studies researchers and theorists have built up an important body of expertise about youth since a number of academic journals dedicated to the study of youth (including the *Journal of Youth Studies*) were launched over the course of the 1990s. In the current context, there is a pressing need to turn this expertise to look further outward, onto a broader field of global political economy, not just because so many different social actors are now concerned with acting on and with young people; but also because so many claims are being made in the name of youth across a wide range of fields of social, cultural, political and economic practice. When corporations, think tanks and states push for rethinking of labor market, welfare, immigration, education, health and security policy and practice by invoking discourses about youth – when they, for example, push for a lowering of the minimum wage or the extension of an anti-radicalization agenda based on claims about the nature of youth and young people today – this has an impact on everyone in society. One would hope that, in such instances, the field of youth studies would be a key site to which all of us can turn for informed guidance on how we should understand and respond to these kinds of global activities and agendas.

The example of youth unemployment

Youth unemployment, which has been regularly in the headlines since the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008, offers a useful example of key differences in approaches that can be taken by youth studies researchers with respect to the question of political economy. In the *Journal of Youth Studies*, this is a topic that was addressed repeatedly during the 2011-2015 period, with

more than 20 articles discussing youth unemployment either directly or tangentially. Almost all of these articles, however, take one of two approaches: they study the experiences that young people have of unemployment, underemployment, marginal employment, employment training programmes, and more generally, precarious transitions between school and the labour market; and/or they analyse the factors that shape the varied transitions that young people make from schooling to the labour market. The focus is squarely on the lived experience and/or social characteristics of the young. All of this, of course, is vitally important in developing rich and grounded understandings of youth unemployment in contemporary society and economy. But equally, there are many missing pieces. Consideration of other social actors who directly shape youth experiences of unemployment – employers, the state, the education sector – are only rarely the focus of youth researchers’ attention. A study by Klatt, Filip and Grzebyk (2015) of the collaboration between state, industry and education to construct a local school-to-work transition system in southeastern Poland is an exception. Likewise, close analysis of broad social discourses that shape the meaning and significance of youth unemployment is only occasionally apparent – as in an article by Groves, Siu and Ho (2014, 842, 843) that argues for the need to study “the power and networks held by various stake holders involved in debates about youth,” and demonstrates how, in the case of Hong Kong, an alliance of elite government, business and academic interests has driven “a process of ‘genericization’ of middle-class youth ... [that] perpetuates a marginalization of the activities of their less privileged counterparts in the public consciousness.” Further, despite youth unemployment being widely recognised to be a global phenomenon that is shaped by changes in global political economy, all of the articles here adopt a local or nation-state framework for studying the issue.

Beyond this, a political economy of youth unemployment would begin by questioning the “constitution” of youth unemployment itself with respect to “states, markets, and classes, ... [and] race, gender, and other forms of identity” (Political Economy Project, 2015) – or, to use the terminology of Rees and Rees (1982), it would interrogate the “ideology” of youth unemployment. Why are academics and other elite social actors talking about “youth unemployment” in the first place, as opposed to unemployment more generally? Who is talking about youth unemployment, and in the services of which interests and agendas? What work is the category of youth performing, to shape the experiences and actions not just of young people with respect to unemployment, but those of a wide range of other (adult) actors as well? As we have argued elsewhere (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015, 55-78), one of the

striking aspects of the dominant focus on youth unemployment in the wake of the global financial crisis is that, actually, the crisis had a greater impact on increasing adult unemployment worldwide than it did on youth unemployment (ILO, 2013). One way of explaining the focus on youth unemployment is to study the ways in which such a focus was actively promoted by state and private sector elites in order to redirect public attention from their own role in causing the crisis, and build support for a project of labor market, public sector and education system restructuring that directly served their own interests. Whether others agree with our particular interpretation of this phenomenon or not, the broader point is that a political economy of youth unemployment necessarily considers not just how changes in the state and economy shape the lives and experiences of young people, but also how social constructions of youth may be produced to reshape overall structures and practices in the state and economy.

Conclusion

Returning to the exchange between Côté (2014, 2016) and France and Threadgold (2015) with which we began, it is encouraging to see a discussion of the place of political economy in youth research being launched in the pages of the *Journal of Youth Studies*. This is a discussion which we hope will continue to be opened up and engaged with, rather than being closed down; and that we hope will be seen neither as an attempt to attack the field, nor as a project of imposing on the field a single, narrow analytic approach, set of theories, claims or methodologies. Rather, we view the call for greater development of a political economy of youth as building on the interdisciplinary and cross-cutting characteristics that have long been a central part of the field of youth studies. And we see this call not just as arguing for the need to import political economy perspectives, questions and approaches into the field of youth studies, but also to export the careful analysis of youth outwards, into other academic fields and discussions, that may have long-established traditions of political economy but very limited experience of studying and understanding the significance and meaning of youth and the young within the broader context of society, culture, politics and the economy.

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