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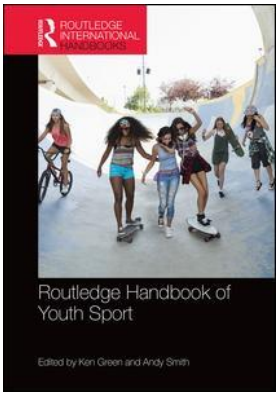

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2

YOUNG PEOPLE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Ken Roberts

Introduction

This chapter reviews how the youth life stage has changed during the current era, which is variously described as post-industrial, post-modern, globalised, neo-liberal, an information age and post-welfare. The preceding industrial age is inevitably the benchmark against which subsequent changes are assessed. Hence the importance of stressing the brevity of the industrial era, which was when most modern sports were invented.

The chapter begins with a brief sketch of pre-modern youth, then proceeds to how youth was reconstructed, and became more structured, universal and less gendered during the industrial age. The main subsequent changes in the life stage – extension, destandardisation and individualisation – are then described. The concluding section explains that youth sport careers have their own structure and momentum that are unaffected by wider changes. Even so, these wider changes make the case for a rethink on how sport is presented and delivered to young people.

Pre-modern youth

It is impossible to generalise except to state that youth has not been a universal life stage. In some societies, in some social groups, children started to work in their homes and in the fields as soon as they were able to do so. Children were treated as mini adults and were expected to grow up quickly (Aries, 1973). Marriage could be at any age from puberty onwards. Pre-pubertal children could be betrothed (contracted to marry), and were sometimes actually married, though invariably with an assumption that these relationships would not be consummated before puberty.

When it was a distinguishable life stage, youth was often a mark of privilege for those who could be allowed to delay adulthood while they completed their education, trained for a profession or practised the arts of warfare. Sometimes the delay was enforced, usually when inheritance of a title or property was involved.

In pre-modern times, youth was always gendered. Often all the youths were males. Full adulthood for high status young men could be delayed until an aristocratic title was inherited and family property passed down to the rising generation. For such males, major landmarks in the transition through youth could be completion of formal education or an apprenticeship, or

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participation in a military campaign, but always marriage, which made it possible for men to father legitimate children. It was usually possible for the sisters of these young men to marry at any age after puberty whereupon they became adult women. Until they married or were betrothed, they were maidens, available for offers. However, practices changed in early modern Europe's aristocratic families when it became normal to delay girls coming out until the late-teenage years. In England, these debutantes were formally presented at the court of the monarch. This practice ended in 1958, but London society still organises a season of balls and other events that are attended by eligible daughters and possible suitors. Whereas a male could become accepted as an adult without marrying, this was usually impossible for a daughter unless she inherited family property (in the absence of a male heir). Once passed child-bearing age, single women became spinsters and could not expect this status to change.

Youth in the industrial age

When countries became industrial and urban, youth was always reconstructed. In this process youth always became a more firmly structured, and thereby a more distinct, life stage. Also, youth always became universal within the countries, meaning that it became a distinct life stage for all social groups, and it became less gendered than in the past.

The reconstruction was due mainly to the multiplication of laws specifying age-related rights, responsibilities and prohibitions (Wallace and Kovacheva, 1998). There were laws specifying the ages between which children and young people had to attend school, and the ages from which they could undertake paid employment, sometimes, at first, with restrictions on the hours that they could work and the kinds of work that they could do. There were laws stipulating the ages from which young people could purchase alcohol and tobacco, watch adult entertainment and engage in consensual sexual activity. Then there were the ages at which young people became eligible to vote and hold public office, which became relevant for all young people when the franchise was extended to all adults, male and female. There were also ages at which young people became eligible for full adult welfare entitlements – sickness and unemployment benefits, and housing assistance for example. There was never a single age at which all the new rights and responsibilities took effect. Thus, youth became the life stage during which new adult rights and responsibilities were gradually bestowed. That said, completing full-time education, obtaining an adult job, marriage and parenthood remained the really major landmarks. Once passed these, you were an adult. Youth became a life stage for males and females, and in this sense was less gendered than in the past. However, it remained normal for males and females to be educated differently and to be employed in gendered occupations, and for girls, marriage and parenthood were somewhat more significant landmarks than for men, though for the latter it usually meant becoming the main breadwinner while the woman's main role was henceforth domestic.

As youth became a distinct life stage, special youth services were introduced. There were youth courts and sentences deemed appropriate for young offenders who were usually kept out of adult prisons. Special services and new professions were created to provide young people with education and career advice, and assistance in finding suitable jobs. Apprenticeships were joined by additional juvenile jobs thus creating an intermediate stage for everyone between being a child and an adult employee. Additional youth services offered legal, health and housing advice. Special housing was allocated for young people, especially full-time students who needed to move away from their parents' homes. Civil society organisations – churches, trade unions and political parties – created youth sections. The same applied in sports clubs and associations. Dedicated youth agencies were created – scouts, guides, and youth clubs with various sponsors.

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As countries became more prosperous, various commercial goods and services were targeted as a distinct youth market – fashion, music, films, holidays, motor bikes and scooters.

This is how a 'classical' youth life stage was constructed. It is inevitably the benchmark against which more recent changes are assessed. So it is useful to bear in mind that the classical youth life stage lasted for less than a century in most countries, and in much of the world, especially in the global south, the countries and their young people are currently skipping the industrial stage. Youth move from traditional lives in traditional villages into cities where a post-modern type of youthhood awaits them.

Ideas that survive into the present about the age group that can be described as youth were formed in the industrial period. The precise ages before and after which it is inappropriate to describe someone as a youth vary from country to country. In North America, youth are passing through the high school years (twelve to eighteen/nineteen). In England, it is the fourteen to twenty-one age group for whom local education authorities were made responsible for the provision of youth services in the 1918 Education Act. In Germany, youth included anyone still serving an apprenticeship or in higher education (which could be up to the mid-twenties). In communist Eastern Europe, the Komsomol (the communist party youth organisation) had members up to age twenty-eight after which they could progress to full party membership. The age limits varied from place-to-place, but in all industrial countries the word youth became associated with a specific age group.

The wider societies' thinking about this life stage was influenced profoundly by a theory of adolescence first formulated by the American psychologist, G. Stanley Hall (1904). He argued that adolescence began with puberty and lasted until the physiological changes that were set in motion were complete. He suggested that the intervening years were traumatic for young people and all those around them: a period of storm and stress that lasted until adolescents had come to terms with their new bodies and emotions. This theory of adolescence was woven into the Freudian psychology that was influential in the mid-twentieth century, and suggested that the life stage was complete when a young person had formed a stable adult identity (Erikson, 1968). Puberty was universal, and therefore adolescence was regarded as a universal life stage. The American social anthropologist Margaret Mead (1935, 1971) challenged this view, claiming that Pacific island teenagers passed through the life stage without any storm and stress. Subsequently, instead of trying to identify universal characteristics, sociologists have stressed the extent to which youth has always been socially constructed: that the ages when it begins and ends have varied by time and place, and often between social groups in the same places and at the same time. The very evident reconstruction of youth – as societies have become post-industrial – has led to sociology replacing psychology as the lead discipline in youth studies (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007).

Youth in the post-industrial age

During the last forty years, the youth life stage has been reshaped in all Western countries, and most other countries have increasingly resembled the West in the character of the life stage. Specifically, the life stage has been generally extended, but with huge variations in how long it now lasts. Second, the several youth life stage transitions have been destandardised, meaning that there is no longer a single, normal sequence. Third, these developments have led to the increased individualisation of youth biographies.

For present purposes, there is no need to debate the contributions of economic and occupational restructuring (the switch of employment from manufacturing to services, and from manual into non-manual occupations), the increased appetite of parents and young people for

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educational qualifications, the role of new information and communication technologies, the neo-liberal economic and social policies of governments, and the normalisation of the use of the contraceptive pill by single young women. The crucial point for present purposes is that the youth life stage has been reshaped.

Extended youth

The construction of youth in the industrial era involved the introduction of compulsory schooling, initially at elementary and lower secondary levels (up to age sixteen). Subsequently in post-industrial societies it has become more common, and it is now compulsory in many countries, for young people to complete upper secondary education (up to age eighteen or nineteen), and increasing numbers have been enrolling in tertiary education – a name that is replacing higher education as the systems transform from elite to mass. In some countries (Slovenia in Europe and South Korea in Asia, for example), around eighty per cent of young people now progress into tertiary education. Part of the explanation is that there are fewer low-level jobs for which no qualifications are required, and more jobs where entry requires advanced qualifications. However, educational expansion has outpaced occupational upgrading, and an outcome has been the devaluation of educational credentials. Upper secondary qualifications can now be demanded of applicants for jobs that sixteen-year-olds formerly entered. University qualifications are now necessary for entry to jobs for which upper secondary qualifications were once sufficient. Young people who complete university courses today find that their qualifications do not guarantee access to graduate jobs. All they have earned is admission to the pools that are allowed to compete for these occupations.

Another development that has extended education-to-work transitions has been the insertion of intermediate stages between initial employment and jobs from which it is possible to build an adult career. Entrants to the labour market, whatever their qualifications, now face layers of screens. These are composed of internships, training programmes, part-time and temporary jobs. All these are stages from which young people may (but will not necessarily) progress to permanent full-time employment that pays an adult salary. An outcome is that most young people today reach their mid-twenties or beyond before they establish themselves in what they can regard as career jobs.

Education-to-work transitions have lengthened for most young people, but not for everyone. There are still some sixteen-year-olds who obtain then manage to hold onto full-time employment. There are still university graduates who step straight from their courses into graduate career jobs. Overall, transitions into working life have been extended, and simultaneously these transitions have become more varied in length.

A related trend has been for young people to delay marriage and parenthood until their late-twenties or into their thirties. Intermediate stages have been inserted into family and housing life-stage transitions. In the working class communities in South Wales that Diana Leonard (1980) studied in the 1960s and early 1970s, it was not uncommon for a young couple to each leave their family homes, marry, start life in their own marital home, and sometimes lose their virginity all within a single day. Nowadays, such compressed transitions are extremely rare. Young people exit their parents' homes to live singly or in shared housing. They typically rent accommodation. Some start to do so when students then continue for many years after leaving education (Heath and Kenyon, 2001). The age when it is normal to first become a home-owner has shifted upwards into mid-thirties and even beyond (Claphamet al., 2010). Marriage is now usually preceded by cohabitation, which is usually preceded by several sexually active relationships.

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However, we should note that some young people have prosperous and generous parents who can enable their children to become property owners while still students, and some young women start their careers as mothers while teenagers. It is remarkable that behaviour that was regarded as perfectly normal fifty years ago – young motherhood, and starting work in a job without formal training at age sixteen to eighteen – are now seen as problems and signs of disadvantage.

The upward extension of youth has not been compensated by a delay in the start of the life stage. If anything, youth is starting earlier than ever before as a result of the marketing of youth fashions and music to the pre-teens amid fears over the premature sexualisation of children. However, typical ages of puberty have remained stable in post-industrial countries where there was a decline in the mid-twentieth century, which was associated with rising standards of living and nutrition and improved medical services. Likewise, in these countries, typical ages of first full sexual experience have remained stable at fifteen to seventeen.

There are several unresolved issues. One is whether we should talk of an extended youth or sub-divide the life stage into youth and young adulthood or emerging adulthood as proposed by American sociologist Jim Arnett (2005). The problem with sub-division is where to draw the boundary. The end of the high school years may feel right in North America but less so in countries where twenty-somethings are comfortable with the youth label. Indeed, throughout the global south all those still waiting to advance into leadership roles in business and politics like to identify with the youth of their countries.

Another issue concerns the extent to which young people are choosing to delay taking on adult responsibilities as opposed to being held back by the absence of opportunities. Would twenty-somethings hop from one short-lived job to another, adding bytes to lengthening CVs, if the option of a steady career job was available?

A further issue concerns whether delayed transitions to full adulthood are resulting in young people's socio-psychological development being permanently arrested as argued by Canadian sociologist James Côté (2000). This has been a long-running issue in Southern European countries where it remained normal throughout the modern era (as it was before then) for young people to remain living with their parents until their late-twenties or into their early-thirties (Cavalli, 1997). The argument of Southern European critics, and Côté, is that young adults can become permanently reluctant and maybe incapable of taking-on responsibilities as heads of families, becoming parents, and needing to hold down career jobs. Will young adults who continue to rely on the bank of mum and dad throughout an extended life stage ever become reliable bankers for their own children?

A final issue is whether, for some young people, the extension of youth may prove never ending through the poverty of their employment opportunities rather than their own choices. Experience of prolonged unemployment when young increases the risks of long-term labour-market precarity (Ainley and Allen, 2010). These risks are known to be class-related.

Destandardisation

There are two ways in which youth life stage transitions have been destandardised. First, in the previous industrial era, there was a standard, proper order in which these transitions were made, and the vast majority of young people followed what was regarded as the correct sequence. You began by completing education, then establishing yourself in employment, following which you became financially independent and able, with a partner, to maintain an independent household whereupon you could marry and become a parent. Today it is so common as to be considered normal for young people to depart from this standard sequence. They may cohabit

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prior to completing full-time education. Couples are likely to become parents before they marry. In fact they may dispense with marriage entirely. Any order of life events has become socially acceptable.

Second, transitions were formerly treated as non-reversible, and were rarely reversed. When you left education, you had left for ever: school days were behind you. There was little chance that you would return to a classroom. When you married you expected the relationship to be for life. Today it has become more common and acceptable for young people to yo-yo or boomerang (Pais, 2003). They may return to full-time education after experiencing full-time employment. They may plan this sequence, using a period in work as a way of saving to part-fund their studies. Or the return to education may not have been envisaged, but made upon realising that their career opportunities would improve if they added to their qualifications. Young people today may leave, then subsequently return to live with their parents. This sequence may occur on leaving home to pursue full-time education in another city, then returning after graduating and being unable to obtain a job paying a salary that would enable them to live independently. Couples may cohabit, even marry, then separate and rejoin the singles while they are still twenty- or thirty-something.

There is no dispute that the youth life stage has been destandardised in these ways. The debates are about the significance of these trends. Is it really the case that anything goes, and that any order will do for young people today? Or are boomeranging or yo-yoing signs of disadvantage and failure rather than new, liberating options? For example, leaving education to seek employment then returning to school may be a response to bleak labour market prospects rather than a favoured route onwards in life (Furlong et al., 2005). Likewise boomeranging back to the parental home is more likely to be enforced than a step on a young adult's preferred life course. Young people who are able to do so appear to continue to drive their lives forward and do not boomerang. On the other hand, any former stigma associated with back-stepping appears to have dissipated.

Individualisation

According to German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992), this trend began after the Second World War. Full employment and rising real incomes made households less dependent on extended families and neighbours. Meanwhile, secularisation was diminishing the size of and weakening religious congregations. Also, stronger welfare states were bestowing rights upon individuals: education, health care, sickness and unemployment benefits, access to social housing and so on. Beck claims that an outcome was not just to allow, but to require young people to take responsibility for their own educational and career choices, and thus for their future lives.

In the post-industrial age, as the youth life stage has been extended, individualisation is said to have accelerated. Every individual builds a unique biography of educational courses, modules, qualifications, experience in part-time and full-time jobs, peer relationships, housing and leisure. It no longer tells a prospective employer sufficient to know your family background, the place where you were brought up and the school that you attended. Everyone needs a personal CV. No two biographies are identical. These are sometimes described as choice biographies. Every person is deemed responsible for the previous steps that they have taken, and for planning their own futures. Each biography becomes a personal project.

This here-and-now can be contrasted with a past in which young people could see their future life courses laid out before them. Your parents would arrange, and maybe pay for your schooling, and could possibly ensure your progression into a specific business or profession. You would be expected to marry someone from the same neighbourhood, school or church.

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By looking at a slightly older age group, individuals could see the futures that lay in store for them. Often young people attended the same elementary schools as others in their neighbourhoods, then entered employment in the same local mines or factories. They would marry one another, have children at around the same time, and continue to live and work in the districts where they were born. It was possible to break-out, to rebel, but this required there to be an expected future life plan that could be rejected. It was as if most young people from a given background boarded the same public transport vehicle when young, then journeyed through life together. Today, the metaphor is boarding private motor cars and plotting personal itineraries.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2009) have drawn attention to the normality of geographical mobility among young people today. They move for education and employment as well as for leisure (as tourists), sometimes with a mixture of motives, and they do this within and between countries. Students in higher education find themselves in cosmopolitan settings in which students from numerous countries and with different nationalities and religions feel equally at home. Future life plans cease to be bounded by place of birth and nationality.

In practice, however, it is not always like this. There can be obstacles to individualisation. Migrants seeking jobs and housing may encounter hostility from locals. This increases their dependence on diasporic communities. Migrants tend to move along paths and to destinations where others from their home communities have already settled. Also, some of the trends that have fostered individualisation are now being reversed. The weakening and withdrawal of some state welfare rights makes young people more dependent on their families. That said, most parents do not try to reassert control but do their best to support children in the latter's own life projects. Needless to say, the support that young people can expect varies enormously by social class origins. The metaphorical private motor cars in which they embark on their life journeys have differently powered engines. Yet despite this, individualisation can still operate in so far as it is incumbent on young people themselves to use whatever kinds and levels of support that are available to them.

Implications for youth sport

The wider changes in the post-industrial youth life stage have no direct implications for sports careers; these have their own structure and momentum. Young people progress in sport as they grow physically and improve their skills. At any age from early-teens, depending on the sport, young people are able to compete in all-age events. There is no need to delay players in youth leagues because they are spending longer in education any more than prolonged education must lead to a postponement of sexual experience. There is no reason why sport careers should be destandardised to any greater extent than has always been the case. Back-stepping has always occurred when players have tried to advance too quickly or to levels beyond their ultimate capabilities. Sport careers have always been individualised. This applies even in team sports where players progress to teams, clubs and leagues that match their personal abilities. Players rise and sometimes fall-back to levels that match their individual talents.

The wider changes in the youth life stage alter the context in which youth sports careers develop (or do not develop). Provisions (facilities and facilitators) operate within a changing context. In the case of sport providers, this is an increasingly favourable context. Most modern sports were invented in the nineteenth century and the principal sites of invention were secondary schools and universities. The sports that were promoted were suited to these contexts: teams of male competitors who competed against each other, and by the end of their education (which would be late-teens or early-twenties) they would be able to play in all-age teams, clubs and

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leagues. Nothing has changed here except that much higher proportions of young people now benefit from upper-secondary and higher education. Until their mid-twenties, the largest concentration of young people is in education. This is an obvious location for youth sports except that students are thereby separated from other adult competitors, and young people who complete their education earlier are likely to be disadvantaged. The way to avoid separation from other adults was pioneered a century ago: college teams compete against all-age opponents. The disadvantages of early leavers from education are long-standing, but these young people are now a minority rather than the majority of the age group.

Beyond lower secondary education, players do not need special youth facilities and leaders. They are normal players who do not need anything age-specific. It is veterans (past their peak), family groups, and young teens and children who need age-specific provisions. Other young people today simply need facilities.

If the aim is life-long sports participation, then the youth problem is not recruitment but retention throughout what is now a prolonged life stage during which individuals and peer groups are seeking places to go and things to do. Facilities need to be attractive to the age group —as attractive as the leisure competition. Higher education has successful models. The problem, of course, is cost. Exercise can be free but sports that require halls, courts and pools or playing fields are an entirely different proposition.

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