



Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century. James E. Côté and Anton L. Allahar. New York: New York University Press, 1996. 220 pp.

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Côté and Allahar adopt an interdisciplinary perspective with which to examine the problems that youth encounter in coming of age in Western industrial societies. The evidence of these problems as they perceive them include:

The rioting in major Western cities, the growing necessity for armed guards in violence-prone high schools where students carry weapons, the formation of violent gangs, even in small towns, high levels of un- and underemployment, epidemic levels of suicide, and mindless consumerism. [p. xv]

These problems in turn are considered the result of "frustration and alienation felt by disenfranchised and economically manipulated" (p. xv) youth whose delayed full participation in society benefits other segments of society. The authors describe the economic and social basis for the creation of adolescence and the variety of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives that bestow on adolescence particular features. Côté and Allahar begin their analysis with the social psychology of identity formation, drawing heavily on the work of Erik Erikson (*Identity*, New York: Norton, 1968), and then shift to the political/economic conditions that make it difficult for youth to establish a viable identity. After considering how phenomena such as "identity manipulation," "gender intensification," "manufacture of consent," "the politics of social control," "the principle of complementarity," and so forth shape the struggle to come of age, the authors offer an alternative model. The latter consists of a brief description of the situation of youth in Sweden, where coming of age is facilitated by a "compassionate government and adult community" (p. 157). This more enlightened situation is a result of effective social and economic *policies* that benefit young people.

The empirical basis of the book largely consists of previously published work--the author's and other investigators'. Côté and Allahar weave together a broad range of research from a variety of disciplines to support their thesis that youth are detrimentally manipulated by society's dominant political and economic groups. As an agent of the latter, education comes in for its share of criticism and is identified as playing a major role in the exploitation of youth. For example, the authors argue against the proposition that more education is needed for today's jobs. Their argument is based on several follow-up studies of university graduates in Canada that indicate a substantial number of the respondents were in jobs that did not require a university



degree. The picture was even worse for graduates with master's degrees. Côté and Allahar contend that universities are the beneficiaries of such unnecessary overeducation. In addition, mass education is criticized for *how* it shapes students. The authors argue that schools prepare students to be passive workers. The criticism leveled against schools for preparing working-class and middle-class students for different futures is expanded by Côté and Allahar to say that all but a minority of students are conditioned to be exploited. From the authors' perspective, mass education becomes mass indoctrination whereby schools serve the dominant economic interests by turning out students who are uncritical and thereby willing "to do whatever is required, no matter how demeaning, alienating, or unethical that may be" (p. 125).

While Côté and Allahar are sensitive to and attack the ideology of the dominant capitalist interests, they are much less self-conscious about their own ideological framework. Consequently the authors' often perceptive analysis is blunted by their overgeneralizations and rhetorical excesses. While the capitalist ideology that they attack sees few problems that cannot be remedied by individuals taking responsibility and trying harder, Côté and Allahar see such proposed remedies as mystifications by the dominant elites. For them, the source of the problem is not to be found with individuals but with the system that exploits them. Whereas the authors negate the ideology of capitalism, they are largely captives of the ideology with which they do so. Therefore they are unable to raise the analysis to a new level by finding mediating terms that bring together individual responsibility *and* significant system change.

Generation on Hold examines the situation of today's youth but does not include the voices of those youth. In this respect it is quite unlike *Coming of Age in New Jersey* (Michael Moffatt, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989) or Paul Willis's study of English working-class youth (*Learning to Labor*, Westmead, England: Saxon House, 1977). For ethnographically oriented readers this is likely to be a serious omission. Such an omission, however, is consistent with the guiding framework of Côté and Allahar, who write, "[w]hat is important in the case of today's youth is not the subjective meanings attached to their behavior; rather, it is the outcome" (p. 142). Because outcomes do not contain in themselves invariant meanings, it is left to the authors' political/economic framework to bestow on the outcomes their meaning. The absent voices of youth and the (at times) ideological rigidity leads one to suspect that the situation of young people is primarily a convenient vehicle for the authors' social and economic critique. Nevertheless, Côté and Allahar have a critique worth making, whether the focus is youth or the larger context in which youth exist. Therefore, because this book addresses significant problems in advanced industrial societies, it deserves our attention.



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