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Commentary

Children and Generation: Methodological Reflections on Anthropology of the Future

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Just a few months ago at the United Nations Climate Change Conference, the 15-year old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg addressed the audience by say that “[they] are not mature enough to tell us like it is” when it comes to the state of climate policy. Her criticism, of course, is based on two inversions. The first is rhetorical: a child critiquing adults for acting like children. The second is perspectival: policy change as something eminently generational insofar as climate consequences fall unevenly on varying age brackets. At the outset of her campaign was the idea that formal schooling is futile if there is no future in which to use it. In either case, it reminds one a peculiar dilemma for, of all people, socio-cultural anthropologists: the analysis of an anthropological subject in terms of age or generation forces a consideration of duration (in the Bergsonian sense), generational subjects and not individuals, and the future. This becomes particularly salient when youth or children enter into the anthropological equation. What does a consideration of children, as socio-cultural anthropological subjects, invite us to consider about our own ethnographic method?

Ethnographers are already methodologically oriented toward a consideration of duration. Current ethnographic orthodoxy decrees that the analyst must spend at least a calendar year “on site.” While these Malinowskian ideas of ethnographic purity are gradually making room for more eclectic methods (Nader 2011), the notion still gets to a critical compromise: the anthropological subject matter always includes the passage of time, measured against the fact that the ethnographer will make claims about a subject that contain an implicit trajectory beyond the fieldwork time. When I claim that an interviewee makes sense of her world in such and such way, I implicitly assume that she still may do so even after I have stopped collecting data, despite the implicit acknowledgement in my methodology that the duration is critical. I assume that she will be as she was.

But perhaps not. Perhaps that which the ethnographer examines is not the aggregate of individuals’ lives but rather isolatable but enduring forms of sociality. Older generations of structural-functionalist anthropologists were better equipped to make these kinds of claims. We do not study individuals, they might say, but rather social mechanisms.

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This may call to mind studies of kinship: we do not study mothers and children but rather kinship, itself. As these older anthropological and sociological models gave way to those that centered the subject of a discourse, such as Asadian frameworks, and then posthumanist approaches that disavow the Anthropocene, locating the anthropological subject became more complex. As structural-functionalists viewed the individual as an actor within a broader social mechanistic structure and attempted to understand the mechanisms, itself, the Asadian ethnographer, for example, would come to view the individual as a subject of a discourse and attempted to understand the subject, itself, not a particular individual interpolated by that discourse. To put it in more clear language, when I spend a year at a school doing an ethnography, I do not analyze the child qua the individual but rather the child qua her generational identity, and that generational identity is informed by what people say about it, media representations, its relationship to adjacent generations and, of course, socio-economic conditions associated with the formation of that generation. In other words, one interviews a Millennial individual to understand the formation of the “Millennial subject.”

As different as their visions of a climate future may be, the eco-political examples of Buttigieg and Thunberg demonstrate the way that generational subjects are oriented toward a particular future. This analytic angle, I argue, is lost when communities are taken as a whole, as if group-think were so strong as to override other concerns. Clearly, they do not. Freud looms large over so many fields of social science, and socio-cultural anthropology is, of course, not exempt. One effect of his legacy is that the lives of children are oriented around their past and, specifically, a developmental trajectory. Increasing focus on climate change and global eco-catastrophe has oriented the generational subject around a possibly non-existent future in a similar way that “the bomb” has with nuclear anxiety. An anthropology of the future—that is, how attitudes about the future form a generational subject and make the present meaningful in a different way from individuals in a different generation—affords ethnographers the analytic specificity to understand how different generational subjects conceptualize ambition, hope, and apocalypticism (Khan 2012).

Another way of saying that greater focus on children reminds ethnographers that would do well to reflect on the entanglements of duration, generational subjects, and the future is to underscore the importance of, what David Kloos has succinctly refers to as, a life trajectory. Kloos’ historical ethnographer of the Aceh region of Indonesia, *Becoming Better Muslims: Religious Authority and Ethical Improvement in Aceh, Indonesia* (2018) studies different ways that Muslims in Aceh mediate moral failure within a broader life trajectory. In large part, Kloos’ study is attempting to counter socio-cultural anthropology’s tendency to focus on the “analytic bromide of ‘unstable selves’...locked in or struck by a condition of insoluble moral tensions and unattainable futures.” (Kloos, 8) The way to solve the “split subject” problem, according to Kloos, is to understand how individuals integrate the tensions and anxieties of their present into an aspirational vision of their future. In doing so, Kloos suggests, our ethnographic subjects characterize a “life trajectory” that opens up a deeper analysis of the concerns and interests that make their lives meaningful. Or to translate this fairly lofty-sounding jargon into the meme culture of the Internet, “[Baby] Boomers feel about the epidemics now like Gen Z feels about climate change everyday.”

Kloos’ study does not focus on children. In fact, only a few of his interviewees viewed themselves as youth. But that’s just the point. Consideration of the unique insights into the very meaning-making processes of interest to all anthropologists that arise when considering the anthropological subject of the child and life trajectories apply to a wide range of groups: women, minorities, socio-economic classes. Intersectionality enables analysts to see the way that identity categories compound and cross-cut; life trajectories enable analysts to see the way that a subject’s orientation to her future orients the way she makes meaning of

her present. And this enables us to see afresh what anthropologists continue to remind themselves over and over: there are social groups within social groups within social groups.

Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) was based on a novel by the same (1963) by Anthony Burgess. The story is a tale of a young man, Alex, and his gang that prowls the streets at night brutalizing innocent passer-byers not for loot but simply for the sake of entertainment. While incarcerated, Alex undergoes a negative-association treatment that conditions him against violent and lustful crime with a wave of debilitating nausea. Once released, his abusers take their revenge while Alex is unable to defend himself until an attempted suicide breaks the spell, and Alex is once again free. The film ends up as a dystopian critique of technocratic moral control of the state's punitive system. But that is not really how the story ends. The film was adapted from the American edition that omitted the final chapter in which the real "cure" is revealed: growing up. In the final chapter of the original version, Alex simply grows bored of such youthful folly and decides to carry on a life with social responsibilities and familial duties. In other words, Burgess' novel is less of a critique of punitive justice and more of a critique of assessing youthful behavior solely in terms of its relationship to broader social mechanisms instead of viewing it as a life phase with relationship to a wider life trajectory. As the greatest impact on the modern practice of ethnography is not statistics or sociology but rather literature, socio-cultural anthropologists might do well to heed the simple elegance of Burgess' point: adults pass through childhood, but since all of them do, a consideration of childhood, itself, stands to tell us much.

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