

# Global South Perspectives on Youth

## *A Commentary*

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**Abstract:** Young lives in the Global South are shaped by myriad dynamics of colonialism, economic inequalities, race, class, caste, and gendered and generational inequalities. In particular, the colonial legacies and contemporary capitalist inequalities within the global order have powerfully redefined what youth lives are in many countries of the Global South today. In this commentary piece, I argue that there is great value in thinking about youth through empirical, historical, and relational perspectives from the Global South, primarily for analytical sophistication but also to enrich mainstream youth sociology itself. This commentary piece also opens a dialogue between “youth sociology” and “connected sociologies” in order to produce some decolonial Global South perspectives on youth. Through focusing on changing youth cultures in India and South Africa, this commentary explores how neocolonial and neoliberal processes shape youth cultures and the many global relationalities, connections, and inequalities that emerge from thinking comparatively.

**Keywords:** connected sociologies, Global South, India, South Africa, youth lives, youth sociology



Young lives in the Global South are shaped by myriad dynamics of colonialism, inequalities, race, class, caste, and gendered and generational inequalities. In particular, the colonial legacies and contemporary capitalist inequalities within the global order have powerfully redefined what youth lives are in many countries of the Global South today. The profound economic, cultural, and social shifts at a global scale have produced new cultures of youth consumption, leisure, pleasure, sexuality, sports, work, and education, as well as aspirations, anxieties and masculinities and femininities (Jeffrey and McDowell 2004; Nayak 2016; Nayak and Kehily 2013; Roberts 2014, 2018; France et al. 2020; Camfield and Monteith 2018). Over and above these socioeconomic and cultural changes, empirically the overwhelming majority of the world’s children and youth live in the Global South (Camfield 2011). According to the UN in 2019, Central and Southern Asia were home to the largest number of youth (361 million), followed by Eastern

and Southeastern Asia (307 million) and sub-Saharan Africa (211 million) (UN DESA 2019). Given the demographic realities of global youth lives, relatively little attention has been paid within the scholarship on children and youth to thinking about connections and disjuncture's between youth cultures of the Global South and the longer histories, comparisons, and connections with the Global North. Likewise with the colonial and post-colonial trajectories of various nation-states, there are some important and interesting questions to reflect on within global youth cultures and their implications for youth sociology as a field. As new questions emerge within Western academic institutions around decolonization and colonial frameworks, in this article, I seek to probe what a decolonial and Global South focused analysis of youth lives can contribute analytically to the field of youth sociology.

The aim of this commentary piece is also to open a dialogue between “youth sociology” and “connected sociologies” in order to produce some Global South perspectives on youth, which I hope will also take the shape of a special issue in this journal in the near future. Given the vast scope of both “youth” and the “Global South” as sites of enquiry, the focus of this piece is largely limited young adolescent men and women from the postcolonial context of South Asia and Southern Africa, specifically India and South Africa, because of their shared British colonial legacy and because they overlap with my personal research expertise. Narrowing down the “global” of the “Global South” also allows for some specificities to emerge when thinking about these two regions with their complex regional, historical, and socio-cultural dynamics, and their many differences from “other” regions of the Global South. Hence, this commentary piece, as well as a special issue with my colleague Veena Mani, is an attempt to begin a conversation and thinking around what Global South perspectives on youth and youth cultures can contribute analytically and empirically to youth sociologies.

## Global Inequalities and Connected Youth Cultures

For young people whom I have worked with in India and South Africa longitudinally and ethnographically over the last few years, there are several profound generational shifts, including a new set of desires, aspirations, and dreams about the future. Young men, women, and trans youth I conduct research with in New Delhi and Johannesburg, for example, have new online dating practices, new regimes of bodily grooming, and a particular

aspirational idea of their countries as “developing” and “improving” (Philip 2022). However, for these young people, depending on their class, race, and gendered positions, very often, the jobs, clothes and dreams they seek are out of reach. Yet they attempt to build a new coherent youth identity and life around these aspirations because these structure what a “good life” now means for these young people (Philip 2022). The changes in these youth cultures reflect the many powerful global political inequalities that shape the global order and, consequently, youth lives in various ways. They represent the “cruel irony” to use the words of Craig Jeffrey and Linda McDowell (2004: 137), of global inequalities producing new youth cultures in the Global South, without ever addressing these inequalities, but sometimes further entrenching colonial and capitalist inequalities. Jeffrey and McDowell (2004: 137) argue that “as Western ideals of youth transition have been exported outside Euro-America, it has become increasingly difficult for young people in Third World settings to emulate these ideas.” Hence, as a consequence, long-standing questions of class, race, gender, sexuality, caste, and other forms of inequalities surrounding youth lives in the Global South take on a new salience. Particularly within the present context, the global COVID-19 pandemic has increased youth joblessness, underemployment, inequality, and violence in the Global South at higher rates than for youth in the Global North, further locking in various global and generational inequalities (Young Lives 2022) and producing an urgent need to closely examine youth lives in the Global South.

To think about these global comparative frameworks around youth lives, it becomes important to think about the global connections and intersections that shape the everyday realities of young people. Following from the work of eminent British sociologists like Gurminder Bhambra (2014), the idea of a “connected sociology” is particularly helpful in bringing together colonial and postcolonial legacies to think about contemporary youth cultures around the world. For Bhambra, sociology in the “West” or in the UK is not disconnected from the contemporary realities of other parts of the world; rather, the very ideas of the “West,” are fundamentally built on a relational dynamic of power, which produces ideas of both “others” and “us.” Bhambra argues that the industrialization of the UK and Western Europe are directly connected to the simultaneous deindustrialization of former colonies like India or Myanmar, for example. Hence, thinking of a “connected history” allows for a deeper analysis of changing social, economic, industrial, and cultural relations, as well as the production of new global hierarchies and social systems. It is within this “global” and “connected”

sociology that youth lives located in the Global South can be productively thought about and situated within a broader global politics and its various inequalities. Indeed, as scholars like Ali Meghji (2019) have argued, the very alleged “backwardness” and “lack” of “development” or “progress” of the Global South have been created by and for the “modernity” and “development” of Britain and Western Europe, which in turn shapes British class and race politics both internally and globally.

Building on these ideas of interconnected research, Joschka Philipps (2018) makes a strong argument for a “global generation” wherein young people and their generations shifts are viewed as global rather than regionally bound, exploring the connections and interrelations between the “global” and the “local.” Likewise, the need to move beyond the colonial dichotomy between “developed” and “developing” worlds, by yet again focusing on the shared logics and dynamics that connect the two. For Philipps, “the bifurcation of the social sciences becomes an obstacle to understanding global interdependence” wherein disciplines like sociology focus on the “modern” world, whereas anthropology or area studies look at the “developing world” (2018: 2). Hence, we seek to put forward an agenda within youth sociology for more empirical and connected research that meaningfully takes on board global south perspectives on youth, while thinking relationally and comparatively.

Within this context then, the study of youth cultures and youth lives in the Global South provide interesting opportunities to not just produce more empirical scholarship on everyday youth lives in various parts of the world, which in itself is important and relatively underrepresented. It also allows us to think about the connections and social processes taking place at global scales, and its multiple local manifestations and specificities, including the blurring of the “local” and the “global,” to arrive at a more productive idea of connections, entanglements, and the “messy” dynamics of everyday youth lives. In this piece I want to set out briefly some broad contours of how we can conceptualize youth cultures and youth lives through the framework of neocolonialism and neoliberalism and a “connected sociology.” Furthermore, bringing these frameworks together provides us a way to think about the changing youth cultures, anxieties, and identities within the Global South, and how they might provide analytical perspectives in thinking comparatively, relationally using some analytical tools from youth sociology. Hence with this aim, it becomes important to highlight the role of neocolonialism and neoliberalism within our conceptual and analytical framework to start thinking about youth in the Global South.

## Neocolonial and Neoliberal Encounters

The changing forms of colonialism and economic relations are helpful in analytically thinking about how young people's lives in the Global South are shaped in relation to broader "connected sociological" dimensions. I use "neocolonial" and "neoliberal" as conceptualized by sociologist like Stuart Hall (2011) and Mike Savage (2015). Although a detailed exploration of these complex terms remains outside the scope of this piece, what is important to highlight is how both neocolonialism and neoliberalism are conceptualized as processes that produce a global order as well as a hierarchy of subjectivities that privilege and oppress systematically along race, class, and gender lines (Cornwall et al. 2016; Dardot and Laval 2013). Raewyn Connell (2014) would further argue that heteropatriarchal gendered inequalities are fundamental to the establishment and sustaining of these two processes of neocolonial and neoliberal expansion.

To provide one example of such a neocolonial and neoliberal encounter through youth cultures, we can turn to the vast literature on youth consumption in the Global North that explores commodities and their cultural significance in creating a youth identity (Nayak 2016). These material and symbolic commodities could be items like sneakers, smartphones, fashionably mass-produced clothes, or other sociocultural commodities. Yet the production of these commodities often takes place within global chains of dependency, labor, and production often involving the cheap labor of young people from the Global South (Pinheiro-Machado 2017). The relationality between Northern consumption and Southern production are part of an integral system of colonial and neocolonial hierarchy that situates the North and the South, as well as their youth, in relation to each other. The work of youth scholars like Linda McDowell (2012) have further argued for the importance of both consumption and employment as markers of creating gendered selves and identities. In particular, she argues that when we look at the labor market exclusion of working-class boys in the UK, we begin to see how classed and gendered ideas of masculinities contribute in keeping young men and boys out of work. Applying these ideas in Global South contexts, we begin to see that economic precariousness, lack of adequate employment opportunities, and highly unequal labor market conditions mean that preexisting inequalities of gender, race, class, and caste can continue to proliferate under new economic contexts. Importantly, as McDowell (2012) points out, both patterns of change as well as continuity are shaping opportunities, outcomes, and identities for youth; hence, the

“old” inequalities do not simply go away with the “new” changes, but rather these are much more complex processes that need careful unpacking.

Indeed, these longer histories of colonialism and their continuing neo-colonial forms profoundly shape other aspects of youth lives in the Global South too. For example, youth in post-apartheid South Africa continue to live, socialize, date, and work with the legacies of racialized segregation of the apartheid regime. As scholars like Deborah Posel (2010) and Sarah Nuttall (2008) have documented, in South Africa the apartheid regime tried to divide the South African nation into white and Black spaces to keep racial separation and keep the groups apart. This desire to keep apart white and Black groups meant that the city and its institutions were deeply racialized to produce a hierarchy of spaces, identities, and social realities. For young South Africans today, the ending of the apartheid regime in 1994 and the rise of Nelson Mandela indicate an important shift in the postcolonial trajectory. However, the legacies of that colonial relationality, marked spatially and socially, continue to shape the lives, outcomes, opportunities, and aspirations of young Black South Africans who disproportionately continue to live in poverty and in “formerly” Black townships (Posel 2010).

To think comparatively with the South Asian context, young lives in India are deeply shaped by caste and class inequalities that were reworked and powerful transformed by the Indian colonial encounter. Indian caste scholars argue that the British colonial regime cemented and made static caste inequalities within Indian society due to colonial interpretations and their need to codify social and gendered life (Chakravarti 2018). Youth scholars in India have argued that the impact of such colonial reinterpretation of caste on youth in India is profound in that it has shaped education and employment, as well as marriage, sexuality, and broader social politics. Ajantha Subramanian (2019), for example, has argued that education of young people and India’s “reservation” policy for lower-caste students has inadvertently created the idea of innately superior upper-caste youth and less deserving, lower-caste youth, who get admitted into elite educational institutions through quotas reservations rather than merit. In this way, youth cultures of India become fragmented across caste and class lines, while reproducing caste inequalities in new and subtle ways.

These youth cultural dynamics of race and caste, along with their broader connected historical contexts, do not often get studied in relation to the other, or for the multiple impacts these have on youth lives and youth cultures in India and South Africa. Such often complexly related and intermeshed politics does not get fully interrogated within mainstream youth

sociology. Indeed, most mainstream social and literary theories on youth also do not fully account for such “connected” empirical realities of youth lives in different contexts, historically and contextually, along with the different sociopolitical realities of global orders. Hence, thinking through the analytical lens of neocolonialism and neoliberalism become helpful tools to capture some Global South perspectives on youth.

### **Changing Youth Cultures: Inequalities, Aspirations, and Anxieties**

With the rise of globalization and consumerism, youth cultures in the Global South are also taking new forms, building on both the changes as well as continuities of social contexts. In the context of India, for example, in my previous work I have argued about the rise of “commodified youth cultures” wherein consumer desires, anxieties, and aspirations are a central part of both poor and middle-class Indian youth in constructing their gendered and classed selves and their youth cultures (Philip 2022). Particularly in a context of already high levels of economic and social inequality in India, I have argued that such commodified youth cultures are creating new hierarchies and inequalities among youth, while also amplifying older inequalities of class, gender, and race in more complex and nuanced ways. Similar to arguments made by Sinead Gormally (2019) in this journal on a racialized and classed “othering” among young men, there is a similar “othering” taking place in the construction and imaginations among youth about young people from other social, economic, and class backgrounds. This othering produces narratives about “new” and “modern” youth in India, as well as the “old” and “backward” youth of India who are often poorer. These processes of othering often take on the form of new consumer tastes, new desires, and aspirations among youth. As Victoria Cann (2019) has argued, taste and taste cultures are regulatory processes that create borders, hierarchies, and othering. These dynamics of tastes and desires are particularly important in the Global South, where globalization, neocolonialism, and neoliberalism are producing new cultures of taste discursively and materially in complex and contradictory ways. Hence, thinking about the changing youth cultures and the various inequalities, aspirations, and anxieties they produce for young people, open up ways to think about larger, macro, global processes within a “connected sociology.”



As Craig Jeffrey (2011) has argued in the context of global youth, the spread of market-based economic policies has not resulted in the growth of secure jobs for school leavers, and it has also undermined social welfare institutions. Alongside these changes, the increased opportunities for travel and communication have sometimes had the negative effect of instilling in young people unrealistic dreams of wealth and mobility (see also Jeffrey 2010). At the same time, the spread of social media and digital technologies have also amplified the existing inequalities of gender, race, caste, and class in complex and profound ways among young people (Philip 2022). Hence, the largely optimistic story of “development” or “empowered youth” in the Global South through economic changes must be analyzed critically rather than accepted at face value. In particular, when thinking about youth masculinities and femininities, as Michael Ward and Thomas Thurnell-Read (2019) have explained, it is important to be critical of some of the superficial “progress” with the seeming appearance of more as “inclusive men,” by situating it within the larger relational context of gendered power dynamics between masculinities and femininities in the contexts we are studying. To use Ward and Thurnell-Read’s (2019) term, the “politics of belonging” that we can study through youth cultures allows us to explore both the connections and disconnections, the processes of becoming as well as unbecoming, wherein youth attempt, fail, or achieve various forms of recognition and belonging.

## Conclusions: Contribution of Global South Perspectives

Building on Raewyn Connell’s (2014) ideas of moving beyond theory to think about “Southern perspectives,” in this commentary piece, I have briefly argued that there is great value in thinking about empirical and historical perspectives from the Global South, primarily in their own right for empirical and theoretical sophistication but also to enrich mainstream youth sociology further. Indeed, as several youth sociology scholars have argued, youth sociology offers an interconnected way of thinking about all aspects of youth lives within their social, cultural, and historical contexts (France et al. 2020). As Alan France et al. (2020) would further argue, what “youth” means varies historically, geographically, and socially within particular spaces and times. Hence, “youth phase” is a construction through a series of processes, structures, and representations that give meaning to the concept of “youth.” These processes take on various forms from media dis-



courses to economic, social, religious, or cultural dynamics, which we can study carefully from Global South contexts to produce new perspectives on “youth” and how we might think about it from a Global South lens. Hence, in building on these ideas and analytical tools provided by youth sociology, through our upcoming special issue of *Boyhood Studies*, Veena Mani and I intend to unpack the contemporary movements, performances, embodiments, and imaginations that offer alternate possibilities to colonial and Western frames to understand global youth cultures by thinking through connections, relationalities, and comparisons. From a Global South perspective, such situated interrogations would engage with important domains of youth lives around work, leisure, relationships, sexuality, intimacies, political activisms, education, and family life within the intersections of nation-states and their specificities within the Global South.

Hence, this forthcoming special issue not only puts forward an empirical decolonial perspective on youth lives but also makes a significant contribution to thinking about theorizing from the Global South. We will aim our special issue to privilege both youth voices as well as critical Global South scholarship to put forward a powerful research agenda that takes seriously the gendered, classed, raced, and caste realities of youth lives in their complexities. Through this special issue, we do not set out to homogenize Global South or youth cultures. Rather, we aim to look at the different youth cultures within the discursive space of Global South, without necessarily making that space an “other” or “subordinate” to the Global North. Through this process we hope to produce a dialectic relationship between the Global “North” and “South” to explore the empirical, analytical, and theoretical possibilities of critically engaging with youth lives in and through geopolitics, inequalities, colonialism, globalization, and neoliberalization, as well as specific gendered and historical processes. Most importantly, youth cultures in the Global South can function as an analytical site to understand important colonial effects in terms of gender/caste violence, consumer cultures, queer cultures, ethnonationalism, and communal polarization, as well as the process of rebuilding, repairing, and collective living; youth aspirations; and youth identities.



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His new research project comparatively explores youth, sexualities, urban transformations, and gender in South Africa and India. He has recently completed one year of ethnographic fieldwork in Johannesburg for this new project and is working on his second monograph on decolonial youth cultures of the Global South. Email: s.philip@uea.ac.uk

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