

BOOK REVIEW:

ACT YOUR AGE!
A CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF ADOLESCENCE (2012)

Nancy Lesko

Reviewed by Marion Selfridge

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In her book, *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*, Nancy Lesko argues that adolescence is socially constructed within a historical and cultural context that frames the way that much of the world looks at youth. Lesko's central question is: "What are the systems of ideas that 'make' possible the adolescence that we see, think, feel and act upon?" (p. 8). This invites a consideration of notions of youth present in American modern culture using post-structural, feminist and post-colonial theoretical frameworks. As a social worker engaged in outreach with youth, this book provides me an opportunity to step back and examine how I think about the population I have been working with. Although Lesko's primary audience may be professionals involved in education, *Act Your Age!* creates an opportunity for anyone engaged with youth to explore how foundational theorists such as Stanley Hall, Sigmund Freud, and Erik Erikson have framed adolescence. Lesko also gives the reader an opportunity to engage with critical theorists including Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall, Homi Bhaba, and Franz Fanon, using their concepts to unravel the concept of youth.

The book traces two dominant understandings of adolescence. First, the biological view assumes that youth aged 12 to 18 have naturally occurring, biologically generated characteristics, behaviours, and needs. Lesko argues that youth are viewed as hormonally overwhelmed, growth-spurring individuals outside of society and history. The developmental framework, discussed in stages of cognitive, psychosocial, or pubertal

growth, occurs at the intra-individual level, moving our focus away from collective social practices and “individual responses to broader social contexts” (p. 182). For educators, child and youth care workers, and parents, youth are not to be trusted or expected to act responsibly as they are a hormonal mess, prone to moodiness and overwhelming sexual desires. This prevents us from expecting youth to have sustained and critical thinking and to assume responsibilities, thus limiting their potential agency.

The second framework – a socio-historical one – constructs youth from child labour laws, industrialization, and union organizing that “guttled apprenticeships, which had been the conventional way for youth to move from dependency to independence” (p. 6). Lesko argues that although this economic-based perspective does provide space to consider class, race, and gender from institutional arrangements and contexts, it does not “inquire into how the naturalized, biological adolescent was ascendent” (p. 6). Left out is an interrogation of the dominant view of adolescence, including its relationship to the “broad cultural transformations of time, race, gender, and citizenship” (p. 7).

Lesko employs Foucault’s (1979) work in *Discipline and Punish* to highlight her post-modern interpretation, attempting to shift from an actor-centred to discourse-centred critique, calling into question “the belief in progress and its place as an unquestioned assumption in the human sciences” (p. 7). This considers language – either talk or discourse – as a site of power and conflict rather than a neutral medium. Helpful to those using this book as an opportunity to explore critical theory, Lesko defines and compares post-modernism and post-structuralism, noting that post-structuralism provides some analytical and political strategy to move beyond the nihilism or an “inability or unwillingness to distinguish among alternative political and ethical practices” (p. 14) that is criticized in post-modernism.

It is intriguing to follow through the book the argument that the modern development of adolescence is tied up with Foucault’s highlighting of the creation of a “self-governing, morally directed individual” (p. 7). Although we have moved away from torture to incarceration and rehabilitation as forms of punishment, Lesko traces Foucault’s thesis that we have shifted to a society where increasing surveillance creates individuals that are disciplined and self-regulated.

In her article “Politicizing Canadian Childhood Using a Governmentality Framework”, Janice Hill (2000) describes Foucault’s governmentality as “a particular technique of government unique to the modern liberal state, in which power, knowledge, and state processes work together to shape the behaviour of individuals” (p. 174). Power relations, either negative or positive, are involved in all human interactions. When power relations operate negatively they restrict human interactions and curtail behaviours to create “normal” behaviours. Hill elaborates: “Although training can take many forms such as physical punishment, discipline, reward, social exclusion, education and self-discipline, all are united by the common goal to instil in children the desire and capacity to behave normally” (p.175).

Tracing this influential notion leads Lesko to Stanley Hall, the so-called father of

adolescence. Hall, a psychologist and the president of Clark University, invented the field of adolescent psychology and defined adolescence as a universal, unavoidable, and extremely precarious stage of human development (Hine, 1999). Hall thought that behaviour that would indicate insanity in an adult should be considered normal in an adolescent. He provided a basis for dealing with adolescents as neither children nor adults but as distinctive, beautiful, dangerous creatures. Hall's boldest, most original, and most influential idea was that people in their teens should be considered separately from others (Hine, 1999). Lesko describes his pedagogical directives for discipline and instruction for each stage of boyhood and adolescence, including the notion of working against precocity. Prolonging boyhood with organizations like the Boy Scouts worked to keep youth intellectual challenged, dependent, and asexual.

Hall was part of the new group of thinkers that defined the modernism of the 1900s, evidenced by revolutions in commercial, transportation, and industrial worlds and the tidal wave cultural and societal shifts. Lesko's book uses striking imagery and examples to describe how frameworks had to be created to counteract the threat that white middle and upper class men would lose control of their power in these shifts. The Great Chain of Being was a rank ordering of species from the least primitive to the most civilized, based on evolutionary theory. This locates white European men and their societies, norms, and values at the pinnacle of civilization and morality. This also sets up the binary of progress/decline where all of the great changes of the time – mass immigration and the move of populations from rural to urban, shifting from slavery to sharecropping, the advent of labour strikes – mean huge challenges to race, class, and gender relations. Lesko argues that adolescent development became “a space for reformers to talk about their worries and fears and a space for public policy to enact new ideas for creating citizens and a nation that could lead and dominate the particular problems and opportunities of the modern world” (p. 18).

Recapitulation Theory, widely believed by both scientists and the public until the early 1900s, is used by Lesko to demonstrate how scientific understanding was used to reinforce ideas of hierarchy: the growth of an individual child into an individual adult recapitulates the development of humankind – from “savage” to “civilized”. The description of “primitive as child” was used in racist arguments to justify slavery and colonization, not to mention the divide between adult, bourgeois, civilized, white, and male, versus lower class, immigrant, tribal, and female. Lesko argues that our fascination with adolescence is because adolescence “was singled out as a crucial point at which an individual (and a race) leaped to a developed, superior, Western selfhood or remained arrested in a savage state” (p. 29). There is an imperative, then, to support, survey, conform, and control youth – to mold them into the idealized notion of developed, superior, Western selfhood.

Lesko argues that the “adolescent came to occupy a highly visible and recognizable place, as a being who was defined as ‘becoming’, as nascent, unfinished, in peril ... [or] in today's terms, ‘at risk’” (p. 41). The term “becoming” is a thread running through the book: Youth are “constantly ‘budding’, evok[ing] physicality and sexual charge” (p. 57), mired in religious functionless “endeavour” busywork (p. 53), not living

in the present but existing only in the discourse of “growing up” (p. 137). For me, this is perhaps the most salient concept of the book, this notion of “becoming” as it gets to how we continue to remove responsibilities from youth, attempting to keep them safe, driving them to and from school, and demanding less responsibility than in the past. How have we compartmentalized this point in time in a young person’s life? How in our new service-focused, specialized technological world do we lose opportunities to have youth experience work, showing up for a paper route, dealing with a variety of adults outside of their private sphere? Are we extending this idea of youth longer and longer, with a larger list of expectations of achievements before adulthood can start? Lesko argues that Erik Erikson’s work on development and psychological stages is synonymous with modern adolescence and keeps us trapped in this mentality of youth “becoming” as a holding pattern.

Although Lesko describes various aspects of her idea of “becoming”, she never situates it within the post-structural theorists who have taken up the word and explicitly invite dynamic, unstable ontologies of “becoming”. Deleuze, the most infamous theorist to use the word postulates an idea of “becoming” not as a way-station to adulthood, or an unformed possibility of something desired, but rather as “those individual and collective struggles to come to terms with events and intolerable conditions and to shake loose, to whatever degree possible, from determinants and definitions ... to grow both young and old [in them] at once” (Deleuze, 1995, as cited in Biehl & Locke, 2010, p. 317). The experience of the population I have worked with – street-involved youth – is often one of experimentation with possibilities: what it means to leave family, to give up identities within communities and forge new ones based on chance encounters and new lived spaces. Although much of street life is very gendered and dangerous, where opportunities sometimes narrow due to victimization and violence (Gaetz, 2004), I have met a few youth who explore living in communal houses run through group consensus and anarchy, who explore gender roles and choose new ways to live with or without partnership, who question deeply their role as a young person on the planet and explore how they can create new ways of being in the world.

In “becoming”, as Deleuze saw it, one can achieve an ultimate existential stage in which life is simply immanent and open to new relations and trajectories, to camaraderie. “Becoming” is not a part of history, he wrote: “History amounts only to the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to ‘become,’ that is to create something new” (Deleuze, 1995, as cited in Biehl & Locke, 2010, p. 317). Although many of the youth I have worked with will have trajectories towards early death, poverty, and few opportunities towards school and work, there is within this immanent swirling world of colliding cultures and ages, of street corner shamans and wise women recently released from psychiatric hospitalization, of friendships forged at knife point and psychedelic realizations under bridges, incredible possibilities beyond history, where new understandings of suffering may lead to entirely new ways of thinking and being in the world.

Deleuze suggests mapping out movement through space, time, and social fields. This cartographic approach makes space for possibility, what could be a crucial

dimension of what is or what was. It brings crossroads – places where other choices might be made, other paths taken – out of the shadow of deterministic analytics. It brings alternatives within reach (Biehl & Locke, 2010, p. 323). When I have spent time with individuals who chose other ways not often explored, my experiences in these environments have given me opportunities to see a wide variety of alternatives and although many of them are troubling and less than comfortable, they still remind me of the choices we all make all the time, without a second thought.

Time is the final concept that Lesko reconceptualizes for the reader. In her book, Lesko chooses to narrate her argument by weaving her story in a non-linear fashion. Although most of the book is focused on the progressive era of the late 1800s and early 1900s, she also touches on Cold War containment culture linking to Erickson's theory of rebellion and self-determination, rock 'n' roll and sexual exploration, the *Turning Points* document that guided middle school educational policy in the 1980s, and her own research on the role of jock culture and male athleticism in the 1990s. She repeats how in each of these eras there was a demand for slow, steady development, temporally fixed in rigid notions of how youth should "grow up".

Lesko argues that young school-aged mothers disturb our sense of the "right time" as they have not followed along the correct path of school completion, job, relationship, and perhaps even home ownership before rearing children. Lesko uses Homi Bhaba's notion of the disjunctive present: the "unmasking of the constant drive toward the future and the interpretations of past and present tied to that future-drive" (p. 136) to explain our discomfort with young mothers. Adolescence is an emblem of this linear modernity and time its defining role. Teenage mothers disrupt the discourse of "growing up": of living in the future and the not the present. How can one still be "becoming" when one of our main markers for understanding moving beyond "becoming" is childbearing after marriage? All of these markers of adulthood are being troubled in the 21st century as the economy, student debt, and shifting social norms mean that people are again living with parents longer, are marginally employed, and are cohabitating and procreating without marriage (Hine, 1999).

Lesko's book jumps back and forth into different time periods, attempting to demonstrate the new ways of considering time that she describes. Perhaps because I am so firmly entrenched in a linear framework, it seemed that the book was both scattered and repetitive. Although her argument was coherent throughout, the first, more historical sections resonated much more deeply and seemed better researched. Because Lesko focused on the turn of 20th century and from the 1980s to the 1990s, she just grazed by the changes in technologies of television, film, and music. This means that her work downplays the making of youth through consumption and the ever-growing neo-liberal globalization agenda. All youth, she says, no matter race or other marginalizing features, are seen through the white male lens and thus she focuses on how that lens was and continues to be formed. It was disappointing to see the absence of GLBTQ youth and specific non-white populations in her project, especially youth beyond the U.S. perspective. She does, however, challenge us as practitioners to see the connections in how we see marginalized groups:

Thus the sallow, self-abusive, undisciplined, urban hooligan joined the homosexual, the New Woman, and the uppity African-American as problematic groups for new professionals to describe, diagnose and redeem. (p. 33)

This, then, is the challenge for readers: to use the arguments she puts forward and the critical theorists she links with to examine our own experiences with youth. To critique how we as workers create what we imagine youth to be – emerging like swelling tree buds, controlled by raging hormones, gaze focused squarely within their peer group, and principally signified by their age. I am challenged to consider the stereotypes of youth that are draped over my interactions with adolescents, to notice all the ways they move beyond these stereotypes and the vast differences between them.

In her summary, Lesko encourages us to take this notion of “becoming” and apply it to all of us, coming more closely to Deleuze’s ideas. Are we not all emerging into new identities, into new ways of being, perhaps not any better or more progressive than in the past, but by examining with feminist, post-structural and post-colonial lenses, more aware of how we are shaped by our histories and how the youth around us are created by this post-colonial world? Lesko challenges us to take on the work of advocating for youth, by working with youth as “active participants (not tokens)” (p. 186): to shift institutions including schools and juvenile justice or child welfare systems; to create space for youth to take on more adult-like responsibilities; to work together to shift policy and systems that do not serve youth well.

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