Climate change, uncertain futures and the sociology of youth

The future of humanity is inextricably linked to climate change and global warming. In this paper, Rob White explores the implications of climate change for youth sociology and for young people generally around the world. He adopts what can be termed an eco-global outlook in examining the horizon issues most likely to be of immediate relevance in the near future.

by Rob White

T he most pressing issue facing the world today is that of climate change. It is a problem that is global in nature, but which also has localised impacts. Environmental effects will be both universal, affecting everyone on the planet, and particular, affecting certain population groups more than others (White 2011). The divides between North and South, geographically and metaphorically, are already deepening, as crises related to food production and distribution, energy sources and pollution, and changing climates re-order the old world order. Social inequality and environmental injustice will undoubtedly be the drivers of continuous conflict for many years to come as the most dispossessed and marginalised of the world's population suffer the brunt of food shortages, undrinkable water, climate-induced migration and general hardship in their day-to-day lives. The young and the old, the infirm and the disabled, will, in particular, suffer. Women will suffer more than men, and people of colour more than the non-Indigenous and the non-migrant.

The aim of this article is to provoke interest in the study of issues pertaining to climate change and young people (especially within the sociology of youth) and to suggest various ways in which analysis might be framed in order that we might better understand and interpret what is happening around us. Youth sociology will inevitably and increasingly be a sociology of social change, with young people being in the frontline of both innovative ways

to respond to immediate physical and social needs, and the target for stepped-up state repression. These are among the vital issues of the day.

Climate change: A new era

Global warming describes the rising of the earth's temperature over a relatively short time span. Climate change describes the interrelated effects of this rise in temperature: from changing sea levels and changing ocean currents, through to the impacts of temperature change on local environments, which affect flora and fauna in varying ways (for instance, the death of coral due to temperature rises in sea water or the changed migration patterns of birds). These harms grow more evident every day, yet, even with foreknowledge and scientific proof in hand, powerful interests continue to dominate the climate change agenda to the advantage of their own sectional interests – and it is the poorest of the poor who are currently the harbingers of things to come for the rest of us (Bulkeley & Newell 2010; Shiva 2008).

Slow crisis and social conflict

Part of the reason why responses to climate change have been so little and so late has to do with the nature of the "slow crisis". Transformation is progressive and longitudinal. It is not abrupt, completed or singularly global in impact.

Yet the consequences of global warming are already apparent. One of these is an upsurge in social conflict – between different sets of people, and between different nation states. Four trends can be identified where climate change and associated environmental transformations are giving rise to significant social conflict (see White 2009): conflicts over environmental resources (e.g. water); conflicts linked to global warming (e.g. climate-induced migration); conflicts over the differential exploitation of resources (e.g. biopiracy[1]); and conflicts over the transference of harm (e.g. cross-border pollution).

Climate change affects us all, regardless of where we live, regardless of social characteristics. However, the effects of climate change, while felt by everyone, are not the same for everyone.

Claims to a universal victimisation (Beck 1996) in fact belie crucial differences in how various groups and classes of people are placed in relation to key risk and protective factors (White 2008). Social conflict linked to climate change is as much as anything a reflection of social inequality, and not simply determined by changes in environmental conditions.

It has been observed that those most vulnerable to the "consequences of consequences" of climate change are people living in poverty, in underdeveloped and unstable states, and under poor governance (Smith & Vivekananda 2007). Indeed, it has been estimated that over half the world's population is potentially at risk.

The consequences of global warming will thus impact most heavily on those least able to cope with climate-related changes and whose governments are less resilient or have less political will to change.

The forced migration of environmental refugees also poses a whole new set of questions for public policy and social justice (see, for example, Refugee Studies Centre 2008).

The world of the young

This paper adopts what can be termed an eco-global outlook in examining the horizon issues most likely to be of immediate relevance to young people in the near future. These issues include new triggers for moral panic, social conflicts over natural resources, and particular cultural and organisational responses to the problems associated with climate change. All of these have major implications for youth identities (e.g. as environmental victims or climate-induced migrants), transitions (e.g. survival agendas or possibilities of green-collar work) and cultures (e.g. street gangs and politicised youth agency), which will vary greatly depending upon where in the global North or South young people are socially and geographically positioned.

We might ask a series of critical questions here; for example, how best to speak

now of youth transitions when the planet groans under the weight of rising seas and impending, perhaps terminal, crisis? Is green-collar work fundamentally a youth issue? How do we moralise about desistance from offending (for the greater good) in an ethical environment where desistance from carbon emissions is fiercely contested (on the basis of sectional interests)? The criminality of youth is touted as a major social problem; yet the criminalities of the powerful (e.g. trans-national corporations) threaten immediate and longer-term harm to us all. Double standards of morality will be exposed more and more, especially among young people, as Twitter, social networking and WikiLeaks provide new forms of public scrutiny. In this social context, anger at injustice will potentially turn upwards – toward the greedy who so assiduously ignore the needy, and toward the powerful who fail to respect and fulfil the aspirations of the educated poor and the technologically savvy.

For young people, the present may seem pretty scary as it is already a time when people are beginning to fight and, at worst, go to war, over water and food. This is a world in which technology allows us to choose who is born, according to gender and genetic "perfection", yet within which the global population is booming unchecked. It is a world in which non-human intelligence is becoming a reality at the same time that political leaders struggle to contain the chains of harm caused by the irrationality behind the global financial meltdown. It is a world in which genetically modified organisms promise to feed the masses, yet hunger is more entrenched than ever.

In looking at the futures of young people it is useful to explore existing and potential relationships through the lens of youth studies generally and social justice specifically. Moreover, discussion of recent trends illustrates the importance of a global perspective on the nature and impact of ecological and social changes.

Inequalities and diversities

If the sociology of youth has taught us anything in recent years it is that youth identity is complex and malleable (White &

Wyn 2008), and multiple and hybrid. It is profoundly contextual in nature, with various dimensions of identity embodied in each person.

Discussion of youth identity in relation to climate change will increasingly hinge upon the distinction between "the stigmatised" and "the privileged", particularly as these categories are produced and reproduced on a world scale. The subtleties of identity construction (and allocation) will manifest in a number of different ways, and in relation to specific issues. For example, those youth who suffer due to extreme weather events, such as floods or cyclones, will be re-presented as "environmental victims". This is because such events have a tendency to be deemed "natural disasters", regardless of human interventions (including global warming) that may set these in train. For these young people, coming to grips with identity will involve re-imagining themselves within the frames of survival, hope and hopelessness, anger, resentment, disconnection and myriad other labels and psycho-social states.

Conversely, the self same young people may be criminalised should they dare to set foot in a boat and attempt to migrate to safer lands and safer climes. The climate-induced migrant is likely to continue to attract negative labels, as the bona fide "victim" morphs into the "illegal immigrant". Again, circumstance and the power to label will dictate master status and key identifiers. Victims are fine when they stay where they are, but are unwanted when they go on the move. This process will, yet again, reflect global inequalities and the abrogation of social justice, as this applies to certain select youthful population groups.

For those in the West, a series of questions about identity and attitude present themselves. Is future identity to be wrapped around the concept of "survivalist", and thus the supposed protection of privilege? Is there yet space for the "collectivist" who sees social belonging as an inclusive project of self? Is identity to be based on the fantastical, with *Avatar* providing the vicarious activism in lieu of actually having to do something? How and in what ways is denial of ecological crisis built into the construction of personal

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social identity? Who relates to the stories of *Mad Max* and *Blade Runner* and why? Has growing up with Hollywood versions of apocalypse and forecasts of a bleak future (up to and including *Wall-E*) dulled our political sensibilities and fed the assumption that somehow I (ME!) will somehow always be among the survivors. Why do portrayals of threats to our existence (witness *2012*) entertain, but not motivate? How seriously do we or should we take the problem of an uncertain future?

Each of these questions bears some relationship to a central conundrum for young people of privilege in countries such as Australia. Namely, as a variety of studies confirm, on the one hand young people are interested in the environment, they claim to do things to care for the environment, and they express reasonably high levels of concern for the environment. Conversely, studies also show that, as an age cohort, young people are least concerned about environmental problems, and many are resigned to feeling that they cannot change things concerning the environment (Office for Youth 2009). Knowledge and powerlessness seem to be intertwined in ways that undermine alternative empowering forms of social identity in relation to climate change politics. One cannot ignore the inherent diversity and complexity of youth attitudes that shape both their ambivalence and their impulse to activism (Partridge 2008).

Survivalism

If the predictions of doom and gloom are true in relation to the environment, then those of the global South will feature more prominently in the fears and trepidations of the privileged North. Moral panic and sensationalised events will become a significant feature of "youth in the news", as, collectively, young people from all sorts of backgrounds come to grips with meaning and meaninglessness in a world steeped in a culture of greed and crippled by systemic chaos. Blaming the Other, and blaming the victim, will be widespread and be incorporated into official institutional ideologies and practices. Charity will end at home (witness the recent cuts to welfare and

wages in Greece, Spain and Ireland), and in the home (as we turn on each other). Through all of this the experience of growing up will vary greatly depending upon class and societal resources.

In perusing the news reports of recent mass protests in Algeria and Tunisia (see BBC, 12 January 2011; Lantier 2011), one becomes more conscious of how the experiences of young people vary depending upon factors such as time, space, activity, resources and identity (Wyn & White 1997). Young people experience their lives in ways that are positive and negative depending upon where they are situated. Public spaces for the middle classes generally involve spaces reserved for them (e.g. fashion shops and spa resorts) and the free movement through consumer spaces; for their poorer counterparts buying their way in is not generally possible. But they can create their own sanctuaries, and protect their own territories. The favela of Rio, the shanty town of Soweto, the slum of Mumbai are dynamic places in which the positive, the negative and the contingent are expressed in varying ways. So too, what is happening in northern Africa has its roots in the dimensions of lived experience constituted in and by the social relations of that region.

If we take the planet as our object of analysis, it is evident that when it comes to climate change, for many the agenda will be dominated by daily survival. Answering the question of longer-term prospects may well be a luxury that short-term expediency forestalls. This may translate into survival of the fittest (i.e. take what you can) and involve group engagement when things get really bad (e.g. food riots). For the privileged within the South and among the North, the law and order agenda will tend to dominate over and above that of the contingencies of food or environment. And so it goes – social being does indeed determine social consciousness. Into and emerging out of the vortex of global warming, youth politicisation – depending upon the issue – is inevitable. Marshalling such energy for positive purposes will continue to be a major challenge.

Global warming has other implications for social practice beyond that of reinforcing the differences between affluence and

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subsistence. Over time, the capacity of the privileged to protect themselves against the "consequences of the consequences" will diminish, to the point where all of us will be faced with the same life-threatening, and life-changing, prospects. How and when we get to that point is vital to the question of transitions, regardless of geographical location and social circumstance.

Activism

Profound inequalities and marginalisation are being exacerbated by conditions of climate change. Awareness of social difference at a global level is readily visible to virtually everyone in the world today – thanks to modern communication technologies like mobile phones and the internet. Who is doing what to whom is also public knowledge – from protests and arrests in Iran, through to repression in Uzbekistan. So, too, is the knowledge of who holds the wealth and how the social contingencies of birth determine who experiences the privileged lifestyle. The cars and houses of the West are brought into everyone's home regardless of where we live.

Diverse group formations percolate throughout the global social structure and provide a key organisational forum for young people. For example, for those without anything to lose, gangs provide protection and financial means of security (Hagedorn 2008). For those disenchanted with the way things are, the gravitational pull is toward technological means as platforms by which to understand and from which to collectively act. It is notable that "for those lucky ones who have access to the internet, Twitter and Facebook are the only ways to keep track of what's going on in the country" – this comment was made by a young person in Tunis, Tunisia, during the period of street insurrection (see BBC 2011). Meanwhile, a Tunisian postgraduate student in London blogs that among the factors that led to the violent eruptions were "high youth unemployment and claims of alleged corruption made public by WikiLeaks" (BBC 2011). Global communications technology is revolutionising young people's expectations as well as shaking the foundations of the status quo, everywhere.

As with the lived experiences of youth generally, youth culture is a contingent process. It involves overlapping aspects with active and passive components and elements of giving and taking. This is perhaps even more evident today in the context of global communications and the rapid circulation of images and ideas. Young people appropriate "universal" images and transform these into their own unique kinds of social practice, which give the appearance of "being the same as elsewhere", but in fact the lived reality is different, tailored to their own immediate social conditions (including language).

The circulation of certain material has been enhanced by the advent of the internet and associated technologies such as Facebook and YouTube. Social and other media influence how people make sense of themselves and others, and how they respond to the world that is portrayed in these virtual spaces. For instance, a gang image may not necessarily be seen as "bad", but as something to aspire to or emulate. Moreover, a moral panic over "gangs" can serve to amplify the excitement attached to the label. For marginalised, and often criminalised, young people, transgression can be very appealing, especially as it both inverts the negativity of the label (being instead a sought-after status) and reinforces notoriety (since it feeds back into the very thing that is popularly detested).

Young people today are growing up in a world that is commonly influenced by phenomena such as globalisation, neo-liberal political economy, consumerism and, increasingly, climate change. They are confronted by different value systems (e.g. Muslim, Catholic, Indigenous, Pagan), by the spectre of a global war over resources (whether this is oil, water or food), and by extremes of human experience (e.g. pictures of famine victims, survivors of natural disasters). Simultaneously, they are fed a diet of the celebrity and the famous, of luxury and gratuitous expenditure, of instant gratification and social upgrade through chance (e.g. *Slumdog millionaire*).

The specificity of "self", however, is shaped not only by epochal and global features, but also by the mundane experiences

of family, friends, neighbourhood, school and community (White & Wyn 2008). The global may shape the local, but it is on the streets and in the suburbs that the particularities of social life are constructed and made manifest. This is why responses to global warming will vary among young people and will take many different cultural forms.

Whose voice is heard is critical where young people are concerned. Importantly, there is a need to view issues and trends on a global scale and, as part of this, to balance the unique experiences and knowledge of those from the "South", who more often than not are excluded or silenced from such dialogue, with the overwhelming experiences and knowledge of the "North" (see Connell 2007). Looking into the future is not a socially neutral exercise but is inherently values-based and involves a series of vital ethical questions, especially as these pertain to matters of social power, political decision-making and ecological wellbeing.

Conclusion

The recent floods in Pakistan provide a terrible vision of what the future holds for many around the world today as temperatures rise and climates alter local landscapes and people's lives in a radical way. The challenges are there, whether we like it or not, and the relevance of sociology in general very much depends upon how sociologists respond to these challenges. The present marks the beginning of a long period of ecological, social, economic and political turbulence for which we are ill prepared.

All of this has implications for how we "do" sociology of youth. The critical sociologist will attempt to describe, interpret, understand and perhaps even try to change the world around them. Increasingly we will need to do this in a less parochial way, not so much in relation to our personally chosen problems, our pet projects, and our fund-gathering research agendas, but according to the dictates of the massive ecological and social problems emerging around us. What is the point of study, if the physical world of young people cannot sustain them (and us) into the future?

Globalisation is inherent and central to all of these problems. This means a return to the grand old days of sociology, when the totality of humanity was explicitly of concern. However, rather than being driven by the illusions of civilisation and the bloody horrors of empire, our motivation must be human solidarity and the necessity for collective action. Our endeavour should be to create the conditions for a future that is more forgiving and generous rather than exploitative of humans, environments and animals. Empowerment is the necessary counterweight to the powers that pull us ever more into scarcity, barbarism and ecocide. It is the young who have to be at the forefront of the needed transformations, for they surely have the most to expect and ultimately the most to lose, if together we cannot alter what lies ahead.

The sociology of youth is, therefore, and somewhat ironically, implicated in a sociology of the future. Looking over the horizon needs to become a routine part of how sociologists examine present-day social structures, systems and actors. As with youth studies, sociology of the future is grounded in present realities and capabilities, as well as in what is yet to come. Global warming and climate change are the crucial issues of the present age. We ignore them at our peril.

Notes

1. Biopiracy: "the patenting of genetic materials from plants and other biological resources that have long been identified with, developed and used by, the people to whom these resources are indigenous" (*Macquarie Dictionary Online* 2011, retrieved from, <http://www.macquariedictionary.com.au>.

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Youth matters / Related news and articles

ENVIRONMENT & CLIMATE CHANGE

Involving youth in the climate change debate

A newly released United Nations report examines the role that youth can play in combating the threat of climate change. The *World youth report: Youth and climate change* says that the 'defining challenge' of our century will also be a defining feature of the youth of today, and that it is 'critical' that they both educate themselves and become more actively involved in combating the threat. The 192-page report can be downloaded from the UN website at: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/wyr10.htm>.
(Source: Australian Policy Online website, <www.apo.org.au/research/world-youth-report-2010-youth-and-climate-change>, viewed 8 December 2010.)

Report looks at effects of climate change on young people

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) has just published a report on the challenges and the 'social, economic, health/wellbeing impacts' which climate change will have on Australia's youth. The report, called *Weathering the future: Climate change, children and young people, and decision making*, contains a number of suggestions for ways in which the connection between young people and climate change can be given priority in public discourse, and ways in which young people's views on and interest in climate change can be drawn into future policies. To download the report, go to the ARACY website at: <www.aracy.org.au/index.cfm?pageName=publications_library>. (Source: ARACY eBulletin, 8 April 2011.)

Teen girls face heaviest risk from climate impacts

A recent report highlights how young women are most disadvantaged during droughts and discusses how climate change could potentially set back their prospects for the future. (Source: <http://www.trust.org/alertnet/news/teen-girls-face-heaviest-risk-from-climate-impacts-report/>.)