A Southeast Asian Perspective on the Role for the Sociology of Generations in Building a Global Youth Studies

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Abstract

This chapter interrogates and develops one of the major conceptual traditions for thinking about social change as it intersects with youth and the life course: the sociology of generations. Grounded in an overview of how the notion of generations is used in two Southeast Asian contexts, Indonesia and the Philippines, it develops an alternative concept of generation, emphasizing intergenerational relationships, the impact of youth on the life course, the continuing impact of history and the refiguring of long-standing inequalities in the context of rapid change. An orientation to generations is limited if it is only used to illustrate change across groups within countries, but not new connections across borders. However, the opposite is also a limitation, too easily slipping into claims of a homogenous global generation. A global sociology of generations needs simultaneously to be aware of these differences and similarities that are in a constant state of flux.

Keywords:

generational sociology, cosmopolitanism, globalization, intergenerational relationships, Southeast Asia youth, Filipino youth, Indonesian youth, global youth studies

In the 1990s and 2000s, the sociology of youth, like sociology more broadly, was shaped by claims of significant social change ushering in a new or second modernity. The concepts used to understand these social changes were clearly parochial. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck

claimed a second modernity was emerging to replace the first (Beck, 2009); the British scholar Anthony Giddens contrasted late modernity to the passing high modernity (Giddens, 2003); and the Polish-English sociologist Zygmunt Bauman compared his concept of liquid modernity to the solid modernity it was apparently replacing (Bauman, 2000). This terminology is incongruent with the experience of most of the world, which did not undergo the same first, high, or solid forms of modernity. Trying to conceptualize social change in Asia, and particularly South Korea, Kyung-Sup (2010) and Chang (2010) use the term compressed modernity to highlight the speed of social and economic change in that part of the world. Peou & Zinn (2015) have applied this notion of compressed transformation to think about the changes to youth in Cambodia, including increasingly fluid life course transitions and mobility patterns for young people from rural areas (Peou, 2016).

Many Southern scholars experience theoretical incongruence between dominant concepts and local realities, as they try to import social change theories to new contexts (Batan, 2002; Nilan 2011; Peou & Zinn, 2015). In youth studies, thinking about youth in a changing modernity has focused mostly on Europe and North America, with parts of the 'Global South' or majority world imagined to maintain ties of caste, class, and kin. Yet the speed of change and the emergence of fluid modernities has actually been more pronounced outside of Europe and North America. In South and Southeast Asia, for example, engagement with economic globalization has been particularly rapid, if relatively recent compared to other contexts, profoundly structuring young people's lives (Peou & Zinn, 2015). A global youth studies therefore needs approaches that are attuned to rapid social change and its impacts on the life course, if it is simultaneously to understand young lives in Asia and beyond, alongside deep continuities.

As the social sciences reckon with their legacy as emerging in the metropoles of colonial powers, one strategy to deal with this past is to advocate for subaltern and Southern theories and methods. Another is to build new relational approaches that emphasize connections between the North and South. Young people's lives are diverse and unequal, both within countries and across the world. They differ based on ethnicity and racialized identities and by gender, class, and sexuality. Youth studies rightly focuses on these differences. However, a global youth studies must also have the conceptual tools to recognize that, globally, many youth share an experience of social change that creates challenges different from those that faced their parents.

With this background in mind, this essay interrogates sociological approaches to generational change, drawing on examples from Indonesia and the Philippines. The sociology of generations emerged in Europe and needs reimagining to avoid false generalizations. Yet retaining some notion of the concept of generation will be an important part of the conceptual repertoire of global youth studies that seeks to understand social change. Highlighting limitations but retaining the sociology of generations can contribute to transcending Northern parochialism. Thinking about generations in Indonesia and the Philippines can help explore under researched cohorts, illuminating aspects of their young lives, transitions into adulthood, and social change more generally.

Generations

Young people's lives are changing rapidly. The aesthetic practices of young people are increasingly cosmopolitan and mobile. For example, not only US hip hop, but also Korean K Pop are now global youth cultural forms (Cicchelli & Octobre, 2017; Feixa et al., 2016; Igarashi &

Saito, 2014). Market economic policies and globalization are impacting on youth in many places and educational changes abound (Bessant et al., 2017).

In these economic and cultural contexts, claims of generational change are common. Generational change, stereotypes, and misunderstanding commonly appear in the media in many places. Generational labels are often simplistic (such as “the millennials”), largely developed in the United States, and then applied widely. In Taiwan and Singapore, the post-1982 birth cohorts (often called the millennials or ‘strawberry generation’), who are now young adults, are said to lack resilience, avoid hard work and, metaphorically, bruise easily. In popular culture, generational labels are often used to categorize young people as a homogenous group, whether cosmopolitan, narcissistic, or psychologically brittle.

The sociology of generations is more nuanced than these popular culture and media usages. The popularity of generational labels in many public discussions about youth across the world problematically reinforces negative stereotypes, but highlights social change, enabling sociological understandings of youth to enter public debate and challenge negative stereotypes (Woodman, 2011). Karl Mannheim’s (1928) foundational work continues to be a useful starting point for scholars of the sociology of generations. Mannheim (1928) noted that generational replacement was a foundation for social change, but that the source of change was not biological phenomena like birth, death, and group renewal, but sociological phenomena that only leaned on these biological foundations. While the emergence of new people through birth—and the aging and dying of others—are necessary precursors, generational change does not follow a set biological rhythm. Sociologically, generational and social change has an uneven pace. For Mannheim, a Hungarian-German sociologist writing in the 1920s, the lives of the cohorts unfortunately caught in the carnage of World War One provided an example of old ways of life

becoming impossible and new avenues for creativity, lifestyles, and social movements being created.

The Mannheimian tradition of social generations has three dimensions to its framework. First, it outlines the social conditions young people live in, interrogating whether conditions necessitate different ways of living or reproduce previous livelihoods and lifestyles. Second, it explores how modes of action, expression, and feeling emerge among cohorts coming of age; how generational conditions shape subjectivity. Finally, it analyzes differences and conflicts within and between generations. New problems and possibilities emerge with changing generational conditions, but the ways people experience and respond to these vary (Woodman, 2016). Like many other European scholars of his time, Mannheim considered upheavals in the social structure of his environment and the possibilities of new ways of life and new social movements, but largely ignored ruptures caused by colonialism, which provided the backdrop to the war in Europe.

This parochialism, with universal ambitions, continues in the context of efforts to theorize a global generation. Yet common global trends certainly affect all youth, if unevenly. Youth unemployment and underemployment is an entrenched worldwide challenge and precarious work has impacts well beyond the youth phase, despite significantly elevated levels of education. The pressures to invest in education in order to navigate a changing and precarious economy commonly occur in many places (Brown at al., 2011; Woodman & Wyn, 2015). There are also greater global flows of youth cultural forms, not all originating in North America or Europe (Alim et al., 2008; Ugor & Mawuko-Yevugah, 2016). Some scholars have therefore argued that these dynamics and new global political events have created the conditions for a global generation (Beck, 2016; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2009; Edmunds & Turner, 2005). These

scholars have moved beyond the nation as container for generations in Mannheim's original formulation (Mannheim, 1952). Edmunds and Turner (2005) see globally mediated traumas as creating the conditions for global generations (they call the millennial cohort the '9/11 generation' following the extremist attack on the twin towers in the United States). While there is value in thinking through the concept of generations on a global scale, this approach is vulnerable to Northern biases and hegemony, generalizing particular experiences of some young people, in some places, to all young people. This has been a recurring fault of theories of cosmopolitanism, which regularly inform claims of global generations (Bhambra, 2014; Connell, 2007; Mignolo, 2000; Patel, 2009). It may therefore be more useful to start in the South, accepting that certain trends and contextual forces are global in reach, but thoroughly exploring local complexities in under-researched places.

Using the Philippines and Indonesia to Think about Generations in the Global South

The concept of generations has been used in research in many contexts outside of the Global North. Dwyer , Gorshkov, Modi, and Mapadimeng (2018)—in their new collection of works from youth scholars in Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS)— argue that few of the main theoretical approaches developed in the West are productive in conceptualizing young people's experiences in the BRICS countries. However, the concept of generations was of some use for many of their contributors (Govender, 2018; Lei, 2018; Mareeva, 2018; Petuhov, 2018; Sposito, 2018; Weller and Bassalo, 2018). Similarly Honwana (2012) highlights the way that global market economics has shaped the experience of a generation in Mozambique,

Tunisia, Senegal, and South Africa, as elsewhere, but that this is impacted by local histories and the complex meaning of youth across countries and groups in Africa. These authors therefore use the notion of generations with appropriate focus on the impact of place and history.

The concept of generations is clearly useful to understand youth beyond the North, meaning that it holds potential to catalyze a global dialogue about change in young people's lives and improve theoretical frameworks in youth studies more generally. However, both the terms 'youth' and 'generations' need to be unpacked in relation to local understandings (Almario, 2001). Turning to the Philippines and Indonesia, our focus in this chapter, the relevant Filipino concept is *kabataan*. Both youth and *kabataan* are widely understood as referring to the stage between childhood and adulthood. However, the etymology of *kabataan* is the root word *bata* (Almario, 2001), which means child, and the prefix *ka* and suffix *an* refer to the process of being and becoming. *Kabataan* emphasizes the intimate link between being a child and the way that adult life will later unfold, rather than just a stage between childhood and adulthood. As such it highlights how changing experiences shape the life course, overlapping with the concept of generation.

In Indonesian youth studies, a local history of attention to generational factors in thinking about social change exists. Mannheim's understanding of generation is like the usage of the term *angkatan* (Abdullah, 1974). This term can be translated as 'generation.' It also means a force for change, which is less central to the standard English definition of the term but was the core aspect of Mannheim's efforts to develop a sociological approach to thinking about generations. *Angkatan* has been used to conceptualize how young people play an important role as a driver of social change at periods of crisis in Indonesia's history. Historically, *angkatan* as an ideal type can be divided into *angkatan '45* (1945), *angkatan '66* (1966), and *angkatan '98* (1998). Every

angkatan (generation) is theorized as having experienced specific sociohistorical conditions (a crisis) that shaped their subjectivities as young people and provided the possibilities for them to become an *angkatan* (force for change).

In the Philippines, researchers often use a translated and localized Spanish term, *henerasyon*, which is a close translation of 'generations' as it is used in the West. However, other near synonyms provide alternative ways of thinking about the sociological framing of generational change. A generation is often referred to as as *salinlahi* (Almario, 2001), suggesting a transfer or turnover of race, ethnicity, or culture. This term alludes to a social process of relations among age groups and/or cohorts and has a core in common with the Mannheimian generational framework's focus on contact with and the reworking of a culture. Beyond Mannheim's frame, in the Philippines this contact and reworking of culture occurs within the context of colonization.

In recent years, a generational perspective has been an explicit focus of social science thinking in the Philippines, with a National Social Science Congress held in 2013 leading to the publication of the edited book, *Filipino generations in a changing landscape* (Torres et al., 2015). This collection of local studies uses generations in a similar way to the international literature influenced by Mannheim, while also connecting the term to questions of successful adult aging and intergenerational relationships and inequalities in the context of a colonial history. This broader framing is arguably facilitated by the richer conceptualizations of generational change available to Filipino scholars through these related terms (see also Cornelio, 2020).

As with the *angkatan* in Indonesia, there is a case for speaking of political generations in the Philippines, such as those who were born during the martial law era (known as martial law babies), or those who grew-up during the times of the Epifanio Delos Santos Avenue revolution

(which overthrew the Marcos dictatorship). While this type of generational theorizing has close affinities to similar framings of political generations that have developed in Europe and North America, the focus on history and intergenerational connections in the face of change that is highlighted by this social science from Southeast Asia is especially important. It illuminates how many of the challenges and inequalities facing young people in this region are structurally interwoven with its colonial past (Aldaba, 2009; Francia, 2010).

These conceptual links between youth, generations, and society, inextricably fused with local processes and change, mean that in the Philippines and Indonesia, as elsewhere, young people often come to represent broader societal anxieties, fears, and aspirations. In the Philippines and Indonesia, the young have primarily been treated as potential drivers of processes of development, for example in framings of a demographic dividend from a youth population bulge (White, 2015). In the case of Indonesia, at least since the New Order period that began with the Suharto presidency in 1966, youth research has focused on what was wrong with young people and what needs to be fixed for their future and the economic and social well-being of the country (White, 2015). This resonates with the history of youth research in government and often also academic settings across different countries, with young people treated as an accessory to larger discussions about social conflict, anxieties about the future, and visions for economic and social progress; youth at risk has long been a cypher for larger social concerns (Bessant & Watts, 1998; Kelly, 2000; Wyn & White, 1997). The concepts of generations and youth, as used in Indonesia and the Philippines, therefore demonstrate interesting parallels and certain differences in comparison to youth studies approaches in the North.

Extreme Southern Inequalities and Precarity Challenge the Homogeneity of Generations

While the concept of generations clearly has some purchase in Southern contexts including in Indonesia and the Philippines, extreme inequalities within these countries and between them and many European and North American contexts mean that the concept has to be used with caution. Some critiques of the sociology of generations argue that it is poorly equipped to account for continuities across time and for inequality within a generation (France & Roberts, 2015), which may be even more pronounced or stark in parts of the global South. If this critique holds, the persistent poverty, precarity and inequality in many Southern sites mean that a generational analysis may not be useful, or at least less so than in other contexts. However, even Northern versions of the sociology of generations do not suggest that all young people have the same experience or share similar values, beliefs, and subjectivities.

These local inequalities and precarious conditions that affect generations in the Philippines and Indonesia need to be better understood and incorporated into theoretical frameworks, highlighting for example, economic, gendered, and educational trends that shape and divide generations. Across South East Asia young people struggle to find decent employment (Batan, 2016, 2018; Laguna, 2003; Naafs, 2018; Nilan et al, 2011; Puyat, 2005; Santa Maria, 2002; White & Margiyatin, 2015). In Indonesia, the gap between the national capital Jakarta and other regions, particularly outside Java Island, is pronounced. For example, the index of communications and technology development in Jakarta is 7.61, similar to European nations and much higher than the national index average of 4.99. Rates of work participation among young women in the post-Reform era (from 2004) have increased from 36.7 percent to 43.3 percent

(Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Nasional, 2017), but they face multiple obstacles, including a lack of formal jobs and problematic gendered expectations in the workplace (Partini, 2013).

Young women in Indonesia also face much greater barriers to upward career mobility compared to men (Partini, 2013). These barriers exist in Australia and similar countries (Wyn et al., 2017), although they are not as stark. However, whether in the North or South, these inequalities in employment for young women are unfolding in the context of change. Across the Southeast Asian region, indeed across the world, a focus on entrepreneurialism has been the policy response to continued or reemerging employment precarity, in the context of youth cohorts that are in general much more connected, educated and mobile than their parents' generation. In post reform era Indonesia, despite young people being typically better educated than their parents, the availability of secure career pathways has mainly disappeared. The Indonesian government has responded by promoting entrepreneurship and upgrading entrepreneurial skills—hence young people are expected to be able to create their own jobs and provide jobs for others (Naafs & White, 2012). Young women in the region continue to navigate powerful expectations of marriage and child rearing as markers of adult status (Nilan et al., 2011) as they use small-scale entrepreneurial activities to manage family constraints (Sutopo et al., 2018). Technological developments create opportunities for the current generation but also produce a digital divide across age cohorts, shaped by class and gender.

Patterns of mobility in Southeast Asia also create important complexities for efforts to think about youth in terms of generations. Waves of Filipinos, for example, face contextual challenges through migration (Aguilar et al., 2009). Almost one in ten of its population are emigrants, most of whom have resident status in their countries of destination and there are an estimated 2.4 million Filipinos working as overseas contract workers (International Organization for

Migration, 2013). Remittances from this group have benefitted the Philippine economy, creating cultural flows and highlighting social change. These changes and inequalities can be interpreted through the concept of generations, which can be rehabilitated from the critique that it constitutes Northern theory.

From Global Generations to a Dialogue about Youth and Social Change

The colonial history of Southeast Asia is complex, requiring nuanced theorizing of generational social change (Abueva, 1999; Bierling, 1995). The Philippines endured 330 years of Spanish rule and fifty years of rule from the United States and, finally, five years of Japanese occupation during the Second World War. In Indonesia, the colonial history and its aftermath is long and bloody and shapes contemporary politics. Indonesia was colonized by the Dutch for approximately 350 years and for brief periods by the Portuguese and British. Prior to independence, Japan occupied Indonesia for four years during the Second World War. Colonial histories and legacies structurally and symbolically shape knowledge of youth (Francia, 2010).

Southern theory and subaltern framings have been developed to counter the Northern parochialisms discussed above, with the aim of understanding lives (young and not so young) in the de- and postcolonial present. However, these approaches have their own risks of oversight and overextension (Go, 2013). Despite not being their intention, some argue that these approaches reproduce binaries, like the Western World and non–Western World that they had aimed to challenge. Patel argues that the strength of the best postcolonial studies is that “the focal point of these studies . . . is not the colonizers or the natives, rather the interrelationship

between them" (Patel, 2006, p. 392), an interaction that is not well captured by simple North/South divisions. From this approach, classical and contemporary theory from different parts of the world are more fruitfully brought into dialogue, not neglecting the power relations and political economy of knowledge, but reflexively redeploying and developing concepts from different traditions for new ends (Cooper & Morrell, 2014; Go, 2016). A recent example of relevance to youth studies is Qi's (2014) work developing the concept of *Quanxi* (connections) (Qi, 2014). Reorienting work on social capital, she highlights that capital transfer within families becomes increasingly consequential in the context of delayed transitions, expansion of education, and intergenerational obligations. Qi (2014) suggests this reframing of social capital is useful not only in Asia but across various contexts.

The future of youth studies needs be more inclusive and hence comprehensive, and this requires that the field make scholars and scholarship from Asia, Africa, and South America central to debates (Cooper et al., 2018; Everatt, 2015; Philipps, 2018). The discussion in the section above aimed to show that in doing so it is valuable to avoid reifying boundaries between North and South and that there appears to be value in putting concepts into dialogue. However, this requires scholars to critically reflect, challenge, and on occasions discard elements of the Northern youth studies theory toolkit.

This can also involve fusing theory from multiple locations. For example, Beck (2016) uses the work of Argentinian sociologist Ana Marie Vara (2015) to discuss the potential metamorphosis of global power relations, not an inversion but as an unfinished but also irreversible transformation. Young people around the world share in coming of age in a nascent metamorphosing world characterized by widespread and spreading insecurity and increasingly digitally mediated social and political lives (Beck, 2016). The concept of metamorphosis is

different from incremental social change and also from frameworks of revolution versus reform, highlighting a remaking in keeping with the Mannheimian concept of generations. Metamorphosis is a shift to a different mode, with complex and contradictory rhythms and speeds; in a metamorphosis, before and after are closely linked but radically different. However, Beck (2016) does not engage in any detail with the theorizing of complex social rhythms, speeds, and modes of change that are arguably most advanced in post- and decolonial thinking (Bhabha, 1994; Chakrabarty, 2000; Mbembe, 2001). This is to the detriment of his theorizing and in contradiction to his own claims of a cosmopolitanizing of theory that would seem to demand a global dialogue. Yet elements of his theorizing of generational change, linked to the emergence of shared generational dynamics as a side effect, may be useful in a global dialogue about social change and generations, in the context of fluid and compressed global social changes (Chang, 2010).

Youth studies and the sociology of generations are, like sociology more broadly, shaped by hierarchical relations, a shorthand for which is the North and South (schematic terms that we have used in this chapter to recognize these hierarchies). As other scholars have pointed out, however, this binary can be too simplistic. Young people's lives are deeply and complexly intertwined across contexts, due to forces that are global in nature. Using the concept of generations demands caution and reflexivity, to bring not just data but also ideas from beyond global centers of knowledge production into an emerging new global dialogue about social life, while developing a concept that has continued relevance across contexts. Examples from Indonesia and the Philippines help to expand the concept of generation cautiously but productively, highlighting idiosyncrasies as well as the intersections of young people's lives with global social changes.

Conclusion

If youth studies is to engage in a conversation about global youth and social change, the field will need frameworks that recognize what makes young lives the same, different, and unequal, and how this has been reconfigured over time. For example, in North America, Australia, and Europe, risks and insecurities are growing, particularly for young people, even if some are better protected from new insecurities than others. However, living in these countries remains a dream and a goal for many young people, even if the experience of migration often turns out to be less of a dream. Risk and insecurity, among other things, are not so easy to partition between Europe and North America on one hand and the rest of the world on the other; these phenomena traverse borders in different degrees and forms. Echoing Mannheim, Beck (2016) notes that diverse young people can be considered as responding to shared generational dynamics – with significant variations and fragmentations linked in potentially cosmopolitan but also conflict-laden ways – in their growing diversities and inequalities. Differences exist, but they are rarely disconnected from global processes of social change. Recognizing the differences in young lives across place requires understanding global processes and generational dimensions that shape and remake inequalities and politics.

On the one hand, young people are the recruits and victims of narrow identity, nationalist, and even terrorist movements, including the so-called alt-right neo-fascists, which use new social media and contemporary forms of youth culture to promote old hatreds. On the other hand they are at the center of new, liberatory social movements like “Rhodes must fall.”

While modernity is an ever-changing process that remains in flux, with its changes felt differently in a range of contexts, the concept of generation remains a useful part of the toolkit of multiple concepts and theories used in youth studies. The sociology of generations facilitates a

different way of thinking about continuity and change and its relationship to inequalities. The significance of gender, family, and traditions can take different and even heightened meanings in different parts of the world, even when social and generational change is particularly rapid, forcing people to find new ways to maintain and recreate connections.

However, the notion of generations will be much more valuable for youth studies if it is developed in a global dialogue, both prioritizing insight from the Global South and exploring the way different parts of the world are connected. An orientation to generations is limited if it is only used to illustrate change across groups within countries, but not new connections across borders. However, the opposite is also a limitation, too easily slipping into claims of a homogenous global generation. The world is interconnected, and mobility means that in many places parents not only grew up in different times, but also different places from their children and, in turn, many young people are living in cultural contexts different from that in which their parents were raised. A global sociology of generations needs simultaneously to be aware of these differences and similarities that are in a state of flux.

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