

Review - The Time of Youth

Written by Ineke van Kessel

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INEKE VAN KESSEL, FEB 26 2013

The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change and Politics in Africa

By: Alcinda Honwana

Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press 2012

The key concept in *Time of Youth* is 'waithood': a prolonged period of time between adolescence and adulthood. As a result of a lack of jobs and not being able to support a family, young people are stuck in waithood, an indefinite period beyond childhood when they cannot expect assistance from parents or the state but do not enjoy the privileges of full-fledged adulthood either. Not only in Africa but also in much of the rest of the world, waithood is becoming the norm and is gradually replacing conventional adulthood. "The social contract, under which society educated children and integrated them into the economy as productive adults, has been broken" (p. 165). Mozambican scholar Alcinda Honwana argues that the majority of young Africans are stuck in waithood, struggling to make ends meet on the margins of society. While African youth were the first to experience waithood, blocked transitions to adulthood are becoming ever more common in North America, Mediterranean Europe, the Middle East and even in the booming economies of South and East Asia. Nor is waithood confined to the underprivileged, as well-educated middle-class youth everywhere are increasingly unable to find stable employment. Honwana depicts young people as victims of neoliberalism and failing national policies, but also as creative agents who are fashioning new

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“youthscapes” or subcultures with alternative forms of livelihood and social relationships in the margins of mainstream society. They understand that radical social change is required to overcome their predicament but have lost faith in traditional politics. Their preferred mode of action is social media and popular culture, using their own clubs and networks. “From more or less spontaneous street riots and protests in the streets of Maputo, Dakar, Madrid, London, New York and Santiago, to revolutions that overthrew dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya the waithood generation is taking it upon itself to redress the wrongs of contemporary society and remake the world” (p. 7).

This is a rather bold claim. In her concluding remarks, the author wonders whether we are witnessing the beginning of “an era in which young people will no longer allow themselves to be manipulated by the elites into fighting ethnic and religious conflicts but instead choose to fight for their own socioeconomic and political rights? Could this mean that the waithood generation in Africa is shifting the battlefield from identity-based conflict into class inequality and rights-based conflict?” (p. 167). This is an intriguing question but one that seems to be inspired more by wishful thinking than by the empirical evidence presented in the preceding chapters.

Elegantly written and eloquently argued, these chapters explore the aspirations of this generation of young Africans who are trapped in waithood, their diverse and imaginative ways of scraping by and new patterns of intimate relations that are replacing or co-existing with more traditional gender roles. The last two chapters focus on young people as political agents who are manifesting their civic engagement through popular culture rather than in party politics, and on the revolutionary potential of the waithood generation, as possibly the twenty-first century’s version of the iconic 1968 generation.

The chapters are largely based on information and analysis gleaned from the literature and the mass media, interspersed with quotes from interviews with experts and youth as well as focus-group discussions with young people in Mozambique, South Africa, Senegal and Tunisia. These informants, in their late teens to their early thirties, include scavengers on Maputo’s garbage dumps, cross-border traders and smugglers, university graduates, sex workers and hip-hop artists, workers in short-term jobs and aspiring emigrants. Studies of the precarious position of youth have been a burgeoning area in African Studies for the past two decades. Honwana does not cover much new ground but she does provide a handsome overview of the main issues, condensed in some 170 pages that are readily accessible for a non-specialist readership.

Throughout the book, neoliberalism, used interchangeably with structural adjustment, serves as the universal scapegoat responsible for a broad range of social evils from mass unemployment to the poor state of classrooms, underqualified teachers and an excess of graduates in Tunisia who cannot be absorbed into the labour market. Did the World Bank and the IMF really push Tunisia towards an educational system that has produced far more graduates than the job market is able to absorb? Access to higher education there is guaranteed to anyone who passes their baccalauréat examination at the end of high school. Within a single decade, the number of graduates has tripled. Surely, it cannot be part of the social contract between state and citizens that the state is then obliged to provide jobs for all these graduates?

Honwana describes the Tunisian revolution as a youth uprising against the kleptocratic regime of President Zine a-Abidine Ben Ali, who imposed a first-family oligopoly that stifled both domestic entrepreneurs and potential foreign investors. Dynastic monopolies are distinctly illiberal. It is somewhat disingenuous to frame the complaints of her Tunisian respondents within the overall framework of a critique of neoliberalism. Rather than sweeping generalizations, we need more specific, fine-tuned analysis.

I do not doubt that market fundamentalism has resulted in an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, the privatization of basic services that ought to be public goods and a growing reservoir of unemployed and underemployed people. Not only unskilled workers but increasing numbers of professionals belong to the *precariat*, a growing underclass with few rights and no job security, forever doomed to a precarious existence. However, by using neoliberalism as the blanket explanation for all sorts of social evils, Honwana falls into an all-too-common trap, resembling the ubiquitous invocation of neo-patrimonialism in Africanist literature. In seeking to explain everything, it explains nothing, as Thandika Mkandawire noted in his critique on the indiscriminate use of the concept of neo-

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patrimonialism.[1]

South Africa was never subjected to Structural Adjustment policies. It is true that the ANC- government hastened to liberalize trade by abolishing protectionist tariffs, which resulted in massive job losses. But over the past decade, the country has also seen a rapid expansion of welfare, with some 25% of all South Africans now benefitting from some kind of social grant. Building a (modest) welfare state and spending an ever-growing portion of the state budget on the wage bill for public -sector employees are not hallmarks of neoliberalism.

Honwana does not explore the role of the trade-union movement, which often seems fixated on protecting the current labour force at the expense of aspiring new entrants. The ANC's trade-union ally, COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), has blocked the introduction of a wage subsidy for young workers. It is common wisdom that the dismal state of education is in part responsible for the growing reservoir of the unemployed and unemployable. Yet, the teachers' union SADTU, an affiliate of COSATU, has obstructed the reintroduction of the school inspectorate, which was abolished in the 1990s as a 'relic of apartheid'.

And what about Africa's decade of sustained economic growth, its growing middle class, its increasing attraction to resource-hungry economic giants such as China, and its new mood of optimism? The rise of China, India, Brazil and other emerging powers has given African ruling elites more leverage in negotiations. The West – the ideological bastion of neoliberalism – is no longer the only game in town. In passing, Honwana admits that, overall, Africa has seen sustained economic growth over the years. She correctly points out that growth has not resulted in significant job creation but then switches back to the argument that neoliberalism failed to stimulate economic growth. The real question ought to be: why did sustained economic growth not result in more jobs?

As Honwana notes, in some of these countries, notably Mozambique and Senegal, the state's capacity to manage, regulate and monitor the economy is weak. In such circumstances, could a more interventionist state indeed be the agent that would liberate Africa's youth from an interminable waithood?

The chapters on new patterns of intimate relations and new understandings of citizenship are very interesting, and here the author indeed admits that although problems experienced by young people might be similar, their responses are shaped by particular national and local circumstances. Of particular interest is her analysis of political engagement by youth, bypassing political parties and instead manifesting itself in civic activism, popular culture (especially hip-hop music) and open political protest. In Senegal, a broad alliance of youth and other forces of change managed to block a third term for the unpopular President Abdoulaye Wade, who seemed bent on establishing his own ruling dynasty. And youth in Tunisia were instrumental in toppling Ben Ali's regime. But what about the morning after? Because of their deep distrust of the arena of formal politics, youth remained dispersed in the margins, unable to set the agenda for change while more organized political and religious formations stepped into the vacuum.

Honwana's informants complain about self-interested elites, corruption, nepotism, favouritism and the need to be well-connected to have any prospect of social mobility. Indeed, few seem explicitly critical of neoliberalism. Has the author perhaps framed their responses in an inappropriate ideological framework? Much of the criticism seems directed at inept leadership and the inefficiency of government institutions. Both left-wing and right-wing ruling elites are behaving as if the countries they are supposed to serve are their own personal fiefdoms.

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Ineke van Kessel is a senior researcher at the African Studies Centre in Leiden, the Netherlands. Her main research interests focus on contemporary South Africa and the history of nineteenth-century Gold Coast. She is co-editor, with Jon Abbink, of *Vanguard or Vandals: Youth, Politics and Conflict in Africa* (2005).

[1] Thandika Mkandawire, "Thinking about Development in Africa", African Economic Research Consortium, African Development in the 21st Century, United Nations University, 1998.