SUBJECTS, AGENTS, OR COLLECTIVES?
THE DISCOURSE OF YOUTH AND PHILOSOPHY

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To become what one is, one must not have the
faintest idea *what* one is
—Friedrich Nietzsche. *Ecce Homo*, p. 254.

Abstract

The present paper argues that the term "youth", which is traditionally used to refer both to young people of a certain age bracket and to a time of life between childhood and maturity, has acquired distinctive yet contradictory meanings since the 19th century, and that the category of people, individuals, or persons that the concept describes or purports to analyze (the so-called young people, teenagers, pubescents, adolescents) may be regarded as subjects in the philosophical sense of being persons capable of intentional behaviour and to whom intentional predicates (beliefs and desires) can be ascribed but not, however, as a collective agent, with the capacity for goal-directed activity (such as, for example, political, social, or national transformation), in spite of the shift in the use of the concept from a singular to a collective noun. The paper argues further that the term "youth" is a vacuous concept, and thus lacks any philosophic or analytic significance or explanatory value in social theory and, especially, in philosophy, and that the discourse of youth which deploys the concept can only sustain the "politics of collective singularity" whereby a singular or a single collective subject or a parasitic structure usurps, or feeds on, the activity and capacity of empirical subjects (young people). The paper draws out the philosophic and practical-political implications of its central arguments— namely that young people, teenagers, pubescents, or adolescents those presumably described by the collective noun, "youth", do not, and cannot, articulate a coherent group - or age-based beliefs, desires, reasons, and action; cannot represent (or be the collective agency of) definite, historically-specific political-economic interests or relations in society; and, that, to the same extent, cannot be an agency of, or for, and indeed cannot be mobilized for, any form of enduring political action or social or national transformation.

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1.   Introduction

That there is something, some transcendentally real presence, some group of entities, collectively called *youth* is widely believed. Whether as term or concept, youth purports to describe a specific set of human *subjects* (adolescents, teenagers, and young people in general), a *process* (a time of life that is neither childhood nor adulthood, that is, somewhere in-between), and a *transition* (the period between childhood and maturity). Yet the actual age bracket for youth is notoriously variable: for the United Nations and the World Bank, for example, it is 15-24 years, while the Commonwealth Youth Programme specifies 15-29 years; and for many countries the figure varies from 13-18, 20-25, and even 12-20 years. The Nigerian National Council on Youth Development defines youth as "all young males and females aged 18-30 which are citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria" (*National Youth Policy of Nigeria*, p. 4)[1].

What is more, virtually every country and multilateral institution has got a "Youth Policy" and a "Youth Action Plan", as can be seen in the case of the Nigerian National Youth Policy, The ECOWAS Commission Youth Policy, African Youth Charter, Commonwealth Youth Charter, United Nations World Programme of Action for Youth, and so on. In 2006, the Obasanjo Administration even established the Ministry of Youth Development. The Nigerian Youth Policy, for example, takes as axiomatic the view that youth is a natural kind (young people, the young), what it calls "the greatest assets that any nation can have... the future leaders... the greatest investment for a country's development... a vital resource" (p. 1). These statements about youth, from those of the Nigerian National Youth Policy to the United Nations World Programme of Action for Youth, all assume that young people exist (as natural or naturalized entities, assets, and resources), and that the word or term "youth" describes a concept, that of entities, assets, resources, and human organisms (young people of a certain age-bracket). Indeed all of those institutions conceptualize young people, or youth, as the "future" (in terms of human biological and social reproduction) of human civilization, not just of specific countries, communities, or societies. All speak of "empowering" young people in terms of political, social, economic, and development efforts; all pledge to put youth at the centre of national, regional, and international development.

It is thus clear that some notion, idea, or concept of youth is discernible in the discursive practices of many institutions, from the state, the family, and society to the market economy, whether it is a government department concerned with "Youth Development", or "Youth Employment", the legal system or penal code concerned with "Youth Crime", a traditional family anxiety about "youth behaviour", or "transition to adulthood", or market advertising concerned with "Youth Culture". However, it will be shown below that the term youth is, and

describes, a more or less contradictory and unstable set of entities or natural kinds (teenagers, adolescents, young men and women, "future leaders", human resources, the young, etc.), and that these entities are, in the end, not meaningful things in themselves, not units or entities given in nature, but an *absence,* a difference (a differential network), rather than a reference (a presence).

2. Analytical Framework

This paper seeks to put epistemological and ontological pressure on the concept of youth (as a collective noun) in order to determine how far it can go, and how much it can do, paradigmatically and causally. The paper aspires to be a philosophical critique concerned with the adequacy of concepts, the consistency (and rationality) of propositions, and the validity of arguments. This form of critique is a kind of explanatory critique which aims, in general, to identify the presence of causally significant absences in conceptual schemes, what cannot be articulated or done in a specific language or conceptual scheme, and what is said or done or presupposed by means of such language or system. This form of critique may be called "meta-critique" in that it strives to unite the criticism of concepts and their conditions of possibility; it illuminates or explains conceptual errors by seeking to work towards the elimination of the condition, action, or practice that informs, conditions, sustains, or necessitates those conceptual errors. Here, the critique passes immediately and unconditionally to a *negative* evaluation or judgement of the objects (ideologies, politics, social relations, etc.) which make such conceptually or cognitively defective conceptual forms necessary.[2]

Thus on the terms of meta-critique, while the meaning of the word "youth" (as a collective noun) actually depends, as we have seen, on reference to a set of circumscribed entities (young people, for example), it is nevertheless the *repeatability* of the word (what is meant by it by those who use the word as a descriptive or analytical term or concept) is not something that attaches in a causal relationship to meaningful things or strings of things (to entities given in nature) but to a network of traces (that is, the *differences* in the entities held to be true of youth, namely assets, people, resources, the future, potentialities, etc.). To use Saussure's opt-cited phrase, "in language there are only differences without positive terms [reference]" (1974: 121). Now this suggests that it is the repeatability (the meaning) of the word "youth" that is a *condition* of its being a socially meaningful word; for only by being part of a chain of possible repeatings can the word have meaning at all. It is this that establishes the *field of difference* (the need for the word to describe more than just young people but their attributes, and other classes of things, as we have seen) that confers on the word its meaning (either as a sign, a signifier, or as a conceptual signified). That is, the activity of

conferring meaning on the word "youth" (or what it purports to describe) owes its intelligibility not to a reference (a presence; young people as empirical subjects), a sameness (all young people) or determinacy (the biological, physiological, social, or cultural irreducibility of young people, for example). The wider point is this: there can be no movement from (word, concept, term) to the *real thing* (some immediate presence, some *unity* called "young people" or "adolescents", to which the "real thing" now stands). A concrete illustration of this is the differential ways in which the word "youth" has figured in "statements" ("policy") about young people or what we may call "the discourse of youth", where, indeed, we find no relation of reference that anchors the word "youth" to things or entities in the world, or what, following Derrida (1976) we would call the structural relation to a presence that is always elsewhere.

3.   Discourses of Youth

As is usual with concepts and descriptive terms, the word "youth", which is variously deployed with reference to a distinct category of individuals, to the time of life between childhood and maturity, or to a person within that time of life, has had shifting and mutable uses, and has acquired, even in the academic literature, distinct yet contradictory meanings, at least since the 19th century (Gillis 1974; Fritz 2005). This section examines in detail the specific conceptualizations of the word "youth", and the specific discourses (meta-statements) that "objectify" the word, and the concept of youth as an empirical subject.

The term "youth" elides three overlapping situations. First, the biological-physiological aspects of the age-process, variously described as "puberty" and "adolescence", which covers persons in the 13-19 years bracket[3]. But in this sense, "youth" (rather than puberty, for example) describes a sociological situation, rather than the physical-biological changes involved in human development (Fritz 1985).

Second, the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, described by the term "young man". But in this case, "youth" describes a "stage of incompletion", a transitional process, rather than the vexatious social and sub-cultural spaces which young people are said to be likely to occupy due, in part, to what Aristotle would regard as their lack of experience of particulars.

Third, is a situation described by Fritz (2005: 380) as the "rebalancing of youth's positive and negative connotation"; that is, a re-description of the negative connotation (i.e. ignorance and recklessness of a youth) and the positive ones (the flexibility, vitality, and freedom of young people) to mean that youth is not only a specific determinacy (biological-physiological-psychological changes, objective time, definite patterns, and limitations) but also indeterminacy and incompletion (a

movement towards complexity and valuable complication, a transition to a higher order, etc.). In this sense, youth no longer marks the transition from childhood to adulthood, or even a specific or actual age (e.g. "teenager", "childhood" or "puberty" or "adolescence") but a free-play of style, a free self-definition, a life-style, or, in fact, the social institution of self-creation and self-making[4].

It was partly in response to those situations the term "youth" had to change, and did change, from a singular noun (e.g. "a youth") to a collective noun ("youth"), which now describes not only specific persons or individuals within a particular stage or time of life but also a state of mind, a life style, so that even adults and older people (in their mid-life or after) can be *young* as a matter of life-style or feel young as a matter of personal choice.

What is significant about all this is that it is now no longer possible to distinguish clearly and decisively those shifting and contradictory meanings of the term "youth" in either the public understanding of the term or its analytical implications in the academic literature. For example, Gillis (1974) has argued that many urban societies across the world saw the transition from childhood to adulthood as fractious and problematic; and that this awareness intensified as more and more families moved from rural to urban areas, and as the permanent revolution of modernity and modernization imposed massive pressures on personal identity and traditional modes of living. And with the intensification of the facts of spatial and technological urbanization, with the development of industrialization, bureaucracy, professional work, the market, universal education, and time-consciousness, all of which combined to disrupt the normative and socializing function of the family and other traditional units, youth came to describe social dislocation and problematic identity, crime, urban alienation, and undesirable behaviour such as drug addiction and sexual hedonism (which today includes anxiety about youth and HIV/AIDS infection).

The usual response from society and the state was to see "youth" as a social problem which required resolution within specific institutions such as "Youth Courts", "Youth Prisons" (also called Juvenile Courts or Juvenile Prisons) and "Youth Services" (for correctional and counselling measures within the wider institutions of social control). All of this means, of course, that the term "youth", implied, in those contexts at least, the possibility of what Fritz (2005:381) calls "a permanent state of irresponsibility" (as may be illustrated by the Nigerian situation of the reckless driving by commercial motorcyclists who are mostly young rural migrants). Nevertheless, within this institutional response to "youth", there also exists, and has existed, a positive affirmation of youthful activity or youth self-making. This is conveyed by such terms as "youth clubs", "youth workers", "youth opportunities", "Young Farmers", "Young Turks", or "Young Conservatives",

and in Nigeria by the National Youth Service). All of this collectively affirms the universal image of youth as a desirable, transcendentally benign collective existence. Yet even here, "youth" describes a masculine category, in two contradictory ways, namely a male-working class (which excludes women), with associations of gender-based leisure and work spaces and class resistance. Here youth is signified by their male youth sub-culture, and by "their deviant and often bizarre style of dress a way of making sense of their marginal position in society" (Billington et al 1991: 132. See also, on this, Hall & Jafferson 1976; Mungham and Person 1976; Hebdige, 1979). Another is the positive image of youth as a form of desirable consumption and an attractive subjectivity, a normality hinged on market-exchange, and in young persons' transition to adult responsibility through work and cultural exchange.

According to Fass (1977), it was the public anxiety about consumption and (desirable) market-exchange relations, most specifically in concerns about "hedonism" and unbridled consumption, that a new conception of youth emerged in the late 20th century. This signalled a further shift, in many affluent urban cultures from a conception of youth as a problem of order (which the state should tackle through institutional mediation) to one of youth as the epitome of existential autonomy, self-indulgence, pleasure, and desirable physical qualities such as health, beauty, vitality, freshness, and market choice in terms of consumer goods such as cigarette, designer cars, clothes, and shoes. This is what Fritz (2005: 381) calls youth as "a market position". In this sense, youth has become a *symbolic* and *aesthetic* position, a life-style. It describes, and relates to, the modern, even "post-modern", self-fashioning, and the aesthetics of identity nurtured by consumer capitalism, market-advertising fantasy, and, especially, Western forms of consumerist chic, for example, obsession with youthfulness, youth culture, youthful body, sexual attractiveness, sexual virility, health, vitality, physical beauty and public glamour — in dress, speech, gesture, and personal appearance in general.

This notion of youth has become, despite continuing state interest in youth as a public or social policy (youth crime and delinquency, youth unemployment, etc.), the dominant late 20th and early 21st century conception of youth (as a collective noun). Consumer capitalism has re-defined and re-described youth to mean "consumers"—the target for fashion clothes, cosmetics, computer games, and sports merchandise. Advertisements of virtually everything the market produces (household equipment, cars, clothes, food, drinks, cigarettes) now promote the idea that all consumers are, or should by implication be, young people, or youth as such — upwardly mobile, fashionable, glamorous, and responsible (i.e. able and willing to be all those desirable life-long consumer identifications).

It may in fact be argued that youth as a model of consumption (rather than as a problem of order or a problem for social policy) has become the new ideal of subjectivity in late modernity. This is the case because virtually all the actually existing youth policies we have seen, from the Nigerian Youth Policy to that of the United Nations, stress, as their guiding principles, goals, and objectives, the *integration* of youth into national reconstruction and development. The Nigerian Youth Policy, for example, seeks to, in its own words, "put the development and participation of young people at the centre of national development efforts ... to mobilize their potentialities ... take charge of their own destiny [and become] active participants in the shaping of the political and economic destiny of [their] nation" (pp. 1-2). From Nigerian Youth Policy to that of the United Nations, this imperative of youth involvement is no other than the rhetoric of the many facts and faces of the neo-liberal philosophy of capitalist development through the twin programmes of free market and liberal democracy, and their accompanying rhetoric of human rights.

It is thus fair to conclude, on the basis of the preceding discussion, that youth in the present circumstances describes contradictions (in the conceptualization of young people) rather than the problem of transition (within the time of life) of young people. But before we examine this issue in detail, let us consider the problem of whether the word "youth" does indeed capture the metaphysical complexity of young people. Now young people exist in all societies, despite the fact that people are continuously being born. Do young people, it may be asked, view, conceptualize, or identify, themselves as *young* people, or, in this case, as *youth*? Young people do indeed form a sort of empirical subject, that is, both as human organisms and as persons. The question is whether their being persons indicates their metaphysical integrity as a collective, which the collective noun "youth" describes or identifies.

4.   Intentional Predicates: Personhood

The preceding discussion indicates that the items we call youth, or that are designated as youth in our culture, only exist in what we have referred to as a chain of possible repeatings within language and meaning. That is, as the multivalent uses of the word or concept of "youth" have shown, the word youth acquires its sense or meaning by being "repeated" at many levels. And as has been shown in the preceding pages, the word has never had, or in fact never acquired, a semantic determinacy, or a sameness of meaning; for as we have seen in the case of the uses, senses, and meanings (significations) of the notion of youth, there have not been, neither are there existing, a set or sets of ideal semantic entities from which to derive this sameness of meaning (i.e. the ontological identity of youth as a structure of reference to a *real thing*, namely young people).

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The question, then, is whether youth does have the metaphysical depth or personal agency of real people; and whether, indeed, youth is a determinate presence, with a secure metaphysical foundation and integrity. In other words, is youth self-posting? We can answer this question at two levels, that of "intentional behaviour" and of "subjectivity and agency".

Any entity can be regarded as a person, with the capacity of *personhood*, if, according to Dennett (1981: 269-71; 281-85) it can meet the following conditions:

i.   Rationality (attitudinal and behavioural)
ii.   Intentionality (intentional predicates such as beliefs and desires can be ascribed to it)
iii.   The *attitude* taken towards it (the stance *adopted* with respect to it)
iv.   It is capable of *reciprocating* in some way
v.   It is capable of *verbal communication* (dependent on possession of language)
vi.   It is *conscious* in some special way (i.e. it is alive, not dead, and is aware of having engaged in actions for which it can be held responsible).

The first difficulty we should raise is whether we can ascribe attitudinal and behavioural rationality to the collective noun, youth. We can always ascribe beliefs and desires (intentionality) to persons or people because we can assign a sense to their utterances or language-use and to their observable behaviour (which may typically admit of more than one interpretation). The problem is how to know *which* beliefs and desires to ascribe to persons. Dennett (1981:19) proposes that "we get round the 'privacy' of beliefs and desires by recognizing that in general anyone's beliefs and desires must be those he 'ought to have' given the circumstances". But this typically requires the person having some causal and ontological irreducibility since it also requires that the person is capable of changing her beliefs to ensure, for example, that her beliefs are true, at least in a minimal sense (attitudinal rationality); and that the person is also capable of acting in the light of beliefs and desires (behavioural rationality). Only when this is the case can a person be said to be *rational*, and capable of "reflexive monitoring", her being aware of her "own-states of awareness" during her activity; that is, her capacity to monitor the monitoring of her activity.

Now it can easily be seen that youth is not, in the senses established in the preceding argument, a *person*. Since the term (as a concept and as a sign of presence) gathers and groups together amorphous, discrepant, and mutually exclusive "semantic" strings (a chain of possible repeatings; a chain of signifiers),

it lacks the capacity, even the possibility, of a reflexive monitoring of its own intervention in the material or social world. It is even more difficult to ascribe *intentional* predicates to youth, since it is not *intentional* under such analytical terms as *retrospection* (retrospective commentary upon its actual or imagined activity in the world). As Bhaskar (1979: 104) would argue, "any entity X that lacked the capacity to refer to its own states of consciousness (and to interiorize references to itself in the third person) could not use these states of consciousness for the production and communication of information". This is the rational significance of Dennett's conditions of personhood, namely intentionality, reciprocity, language, and consciousness; for these not only specify the necessary conditions of personhood (agency) but also the necessary conditions for any discursive (non-intuitive) intelligence. To use a formulation of Bhaskar's, the facts of both "intervention" and "commentary" are "always the situated doings of agents at places in time" (1979: 104). But this is, paradigmatically and structurally, denied to youth as a transcendental entity; for as a collective noun, it lacks intentionality, reciprocity, reflexivity, language, and consciousness — for these are the attributes of persons, or what we may call "individual human subjects".

This is the case because only *individual* human organisms have any metaphysical integrity in the light of the conditions of personhood specified above. The upshot of the argument is that any human *person* has, or possesses, this metaphysical integrity, which, in substance, amounts to *capacity*: for any person as *person* shares this capacity, irrespective of age, ethnicity, gender, sex, life-style, disposition, ideology, beliefs, identity, or her place in society, or in the relations of production (class). In other words, youth as such does not possess some separate set of intentional predicates, or intentionality, from any objectively-given human organism. Thus on the basis of what is called the Principle of Humanity[5], individual young people could be *persons* but not youth (as a transcendental entity or as a collective noun, each of which implies the existence of a collective subject which, if we would only uncover or identify its presence would fix its "authorial" meaning for us).

5.   Subjects, Agents, Collectivities

Individual human beings may be defined in terms of their tendencies and powers — as agents who act on the basis of beliefs and reasons, which are themselves tendencies in the real world. Now the question is whether youth has an identifiable *action* on the basis of its position, interest, beliefs, and reasons. To ask the question in another way: is youth an agent (a causally efficacious subject)?

First of all, only human beings, as intentional beings, and as beings to whom intentional predicates can be ascribed, are subjects. For intentional

predicates, rationality and language, make human beings subjects. On this view, "the subject is what speaks" (Belsey 2005: 40). This is why for subjects, *social action* is ultimately connected to the subject's speech (given the centrality of intentional predicates in specifying personhood and, by extension, agency). On the basis of this insight, we should have no difficulty identifying agency at this level — the subject's verbal behaviour, which can, excepting deeper philosophical difficulties in terms of inferring meaning without belief[6], be straightforwardly read off any evidence for it (in the form of authorship and linguistic and discursive responsibility). Despite arguments on the basis of the so-called Principle of Charity, according to which we can take "the fact that speakers of a language hold a sentence to be true (under observed circumstances) as *prima facie* evidence that the sentence is true under those circumstances" (Davidson 1984: 148), youth has no speech or language or sentences or a fabric of sentences that could specify its agency status; for youth has no utterances that we could interpret as indicating its beliefs (and reasons). This is why we cannot have any reason to count youth (either as creature or presence) as rational and as having beliefs, or, to borrow a metaphor of Davidson's, as *saying anything*. For example, note that youth as agency does not speak, and is silent in the discourses of Youth Policy, from the Nigerian to the United Nations'. Someone else speaks for youth in these discourses. Thus on this minimal sense at least, we cannot say that youth is an agent since we cannot interpret its speech, utterances, or verbal communication chiefly because interpretation involves ascribing beliefs (and reasons, which are themselves beliefs, and which may themselves be true or false) to agents (and who, by necessity, are attitudinally and behaviourally rational). Thus, unless we assume that "agents are rational, their doings and sayings are unintelligible" (Callinicos 1989: 114). This is the transcendental argument (on the basis of specific individual agency) against the assumption in the discourses of youth and national and international youth policies and programmes that youth is an agent, and possesses the attributes of agency (even on the basis of *individual* agency to which beliefs and desires can be ascribed on the basis of the Principle of Humanity, to which Dennett's six-point condition tacitly refers).

Nevertheless, as we have seen above, youth is sometimes seen as describing the structural and organizational capacities of young people (which is signalled by the many "youth wings" of political parties, the youth cadres of many, especially rural, communities, the UN, ECOWAS Youth Charter, and the Nigerian Youth Policy, etc). In these discourses and their operational organs, youth is re-described as a collective agent (or agency). But what happens if youth is, as argued previously, not an *individual* agent; is it, then, or can it be, a *collective* agent?

This question turns upon the *structural-organizational capacities* of collective agents, their *consciousness of themselves*, and their sense of *common identity* (as a collectivity). Individual agents may form a collectivity in order to pursue their desires, reasons, interests, and objectives. Typically, a collectivity seeks to achieve some goal or goals, pursue its interests, and seeks to remold society in the light of those goals, interests, or objectives. Thus a "collective exists where persons co-ordinate their actions because they believe themselves to have a common identity" (Callinicos 1989: 135). Such identity may be, again, a set of predicates designating properties unique or special to such individuals, namely class position, or some position in productive relations, or the social relations of society (which could indicate social power of sorts, for example, ethnic organization, political or administrative position in the state apparatus, etc). As Callinicos argues, unless individuals "believe themselves to have something in common and treat this as the basis of their collective action, they are not a collectivity" (135). We may say, then, that the unicity of young people as subjects and agents is not present in the concept of youth.

So in what sense, then, can we say, for example, that youth forms, or describes, a class position (or a definite identical position in the production relations)? But note, following Giddens (1981: 111-13), that while class awareness does not have to acknowledge the existence of class position, class consciousness does have to. The wider point is that it is class consciousness alone in the form of what he calls class identity, conflict consciousness, and revolutionary class-consciousness or "the recognition of the possibility of an overall reorganization in the institutional medication of power ... and a belief that such a reorganization can be brought out through class action" (111-13), which defines class as a collectivity. This is not to correlate class consciousness with the actual existence of a class but merely to suggest that the collective action of individual agents, the collectivity, is a necessary condition for class struggle. But this is precisely what youth lacks: young people *qua* young people do not share identical class positions, and for this reason cannot, and do not normally, have a collective consciousness (a "collective youth consciousness"). Young people *qua* young people have no sense whatsoever of the "recognition of the possibility of an overall reorganization in the institutional mediation of power"; or a belief that "such a reorganization can be brought about through class action"; or even collective youth action, on the basis of a "collective youth consciousness". (But even if individual "youth" agents could imagine this, it would not be a realistic possibility, but, perhaps, only a negative utopia)[7].

And in a situation where youth describes an amorphous collection of individuals without a common language, common interests, beliefs, reasons, and culture; and scattered across ethnic, gender, class, religious, communal and

national identifications, it cannot be said to hold the promise of, or prospects for, what Mann (1986: 219) calls "the capacity for extensive organization" (as, say, the working class or the bourgeoisie is capable of). Thus on the basis of this insight, the following implications are evident:

1. youth is *structurally* incapable of organization by reason of its own collective interests
2. youth has no identifiable *structural capacities* whatsoever
3. youth is incapable of *social action* (as a collective)
4. youth is incapable of *social consciousness* (a universal "collective youth consciousness")
5. youth is *discursively incapable* of accessing its own "collective" awareness
6. youth is incapable of what Mann calls "intensive power", the ability for tight organization and command based on a very high level of collective mobilization and commitment (1986:7).

Moreover, without the possibility of "value-consensus", internal consistency in values, a sense of an alternative to the present, a vision of collective action as identity; without a sense of itself as a conscious actor in the world, a modern subjectivity in its own right, autonomous and sure of itself; without any sense of its social identity as a subject; without, in the end, any sense of a "practical consciousness", youth is, and remains, a metaphysical fiction (since youth has no collective interests or positions that it is compelled, paradigmatically, structurally, and causally, to defend). Even more important: youth lacks any ontological integrity (since it is not even a social group, what, borrowing an analogy of Gramsci's (1971: 333) we might call the "active people-in-the-mass"). Rather, youth is, at best, a *patient* in the discourses of the state and other institutional youth programmes, a "raw material" in the discourses of Family-Adult institutions; and, is properly speaking, no more than a "statement", a discourse of heterogeneous institutional-cultural elements.

6.   Productions of Discourse

We have seen above how youth is the production of not only the signifier "youth", specifically the biological-physiological aspect of the age-process ("puberty"), the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood ("young man"), a state of incompletion in social and cultural space, a life style within the social institutions of Romantic self-creation, a state of mind, a problem of order (a social dislocation and problematic identity requiring public or social-institutional policy), and as a market position (youth as an ideal of consumption). Now all

those "positions" may have their intrinsic language (or codes), or a symbolic and symbolizing system, which "fixes" the meaning of the so-called entities they *over-determine*. The way this "language" or "symbolizing mechanism" divides up young men and women as empirical subjects, for example, *is*, and *becomes*, the *meaning* of youth itself (that is, by *displacing* youth as a presence). But because meaning itself is *differential* without a positive content, or a structure of reference to which the word, term, or concept "youth" may be compared in an affirmative sense, the concept of youth becomes a sign, a signifier, whose *form* and *meaning* (signified) are another sign (another word); or this "meaning" only derives its *meaning* from its role in sentences (discourses), the relations of sentences (discourses), without yielding the real thing, so that the "truth" of the *meaning*, if there is one, lies elsewhere. This is the significance of Derrida's *bon mot* that the thing, the object, itself is a sign). This is precisely what we have seen in the case of the *meaning* and *form* ("use") of the word/concept/term "youth": the sign/signifier "youth" exists, and is apparently used and appropriated by heterogeneous discourses and institutions, without reference to the transcendental pre-propositions of experience. Yet as the work of the analytic philosopher, Donald Davidson, has shown,

> there is no relation of reference that breaks us free
> from the holistic connections within language and
> anchors individual words to things in the world.
> There are no propositions like entities that language
> mirrors, and we cannot steer individual sentences
> into confrontations with the world that make them,
> individually, true or false. There are no meanings a
> grasp of which allows a translator to come to rest
> at finally having brought the other language into
> contact with what is really meant (Farrell 1996:
> 256-57. See also Davidson 1984: 73-74; 215-26).

The implication of all this is that the concept of youth does not stand for pre-existing entities (or even pre-existing concepts) but only for a system of concepts and forms which organizes the discourses of youth, without ever breaking free of this system of difference, and onto an experiential structure of reference, onto the empirical entities called "young people".

Hence we are left with no alternative than to see the concept of youth as an *interpretation*, indeed the interpretation of an interpretation, and, in Derridean terms, the *trace* of a trace; for both interpretation and the trace have, to borrow a phrase of Belsey's, "no final guarantees elsewhere" (2002: 22). In a word, both

the concept and the discourse of youth are rather the *production* of the free play of the signifier, a differential network of traces[8], for as Derrida writes (1976:57), "difference cannot be thought without the trace"; that is, they are traces of other traces, in an endless chain that never yields the transcendental signified (the subjectivity and agency of youth). Which is to say, in other words, that youth (both as word, differential concept, and signifier) is a *citation*, a structure of *citationality* (alluding to something but with what is alluded to being crucially different from the allusion itself). Another way of conveying this is to say that there is really nothing "behind" the citation; it is nothing but the space on which all the "quotations" and "citations" which make up the "discourse of youth" are *inscribed* (as substitute significations)[9].

Nevertheless, we cannot say that youth is wholly and completely the product of *language*. It is also the product of material and social *institutions* (or what may be regarded as *material practices* and structures), or what, following Foucault (1972) we could call "discursive formations", which, he argues, are not only made up in languages in use ("statements"; "a system of dispersion") but also of "heterogeneous elements". He calls these "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (1972: 49). According to Foucault, human subjects are produced by discourse or discursive (social) practices, such as for example, investigations, talk, and writing by doctors, clergy, novelists, moralists, and politicians. These discursive formations actually bring about the "thing", say madness, sex, etc.,[10] they claim to have discovered. It is in this way, for example, that the "thing" is constructed by the discourses of social practices and institutions. Such discourses give the impression that "the thing" has existed prior both to the discourses and the discovery of it. For Foucault, the reverse is the case: these discursive practices have in fact constructed "the thing", the object (of these discursive practices), in order to analyze, describe and *regulate* (control) the activities of human beings. This control takes many forms, one of which is that these discursive practices are repeated across very many and different social-discursive fields; and they go on from there to "authorize" (*produce*) a certain speech position, construct certain objects and truths, which they would then endow with a certain reality, with a certain locutionary determinacy[11].

This issue connects with Foucault's other central concept, that of "power-knowledge", what he calls the "relations of domination" that articulate discursive practices into a historically specific apparatus, for example, the disciplines, the practices of surveillance and control, such institutions as prisons, schools, asylum, factories, and sexuality (1980: 194-95). For Foucault, power is a key element in discourse in that it is these practices that constitute subjects, for, as he writes, "certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, came to

be identified and constituted as individual". Therefore far from power being a repressive apparatus which is imposed outwardly on the subject, the individual, the subject, is, rather, Foucault argues, " not the *vis-à-vis* of power [but] *one of its effects*" (1980: 98; my emphasis).

One implication of this for our discussion is that "youth", even where the concept is used with a referential intent, is rather the production of discourse, or, indeed, of those "discursive practices" (discursive formations) we have identified above, from biological-physiological, psychological, familial, sociological, moral, historical, advertising, and masculine discourses. It is these discursive practices that have brought youth (both as a collective and as a collective noun) into being; and it is these discourses that have sought to "recruit" youth as a *subject* subjected to their goals, values, and interests; it is these discourses that have *disciplined* youth into a "meaningful" concept (i.e. as anxiety, chaos, boundless energy, crime, market, life-style, vital resource, asset, and subject-position, and whose sole relevance is the advancement of national and international market exchange, political-economic development, and modernization); and finally, it is these discourses that have formed "the knowledge" with and within which youth becomes the *product* of the subjugation of objects ("youth bodies"). Which is to say, to follow an analogy from Foucault, that the discourse of youth not only imposes "canonical bits of knowledge" on young people (as *youth*) but also uses them as a basis for construction a "science", a normativity, that is beyond their grasp. All of this together enables the discourse of youth to be, in the words of Foucault, an "intensification of the interventions of power to a multiplication of discourse"; for the very multiplication and the multiplicity of the discourse of youth is, in the last analysis, an "intensification of the interventions of power" in the life-knowledge-being of young people, so that even young people themselves are *subjugated* to an object called "youth", that is, are "*repeated, renewed, and displaced*" (Foucault 1981: 70; my emphasis).

If this is indeed the case, then youth is not a consciously willing subject creating its youthness (youthfulness or being-in-itself) from a point outside discourse; it is not even a self, or a *demiurgic* subject that has a stance outside discourse, but rather as a localized position with it. To this extent, then, the use of the concept of youth by the state, the market, sociology, and social policy, for example, are decisively and irremediably discursive: youth is a discursive *construct*, an effect of cultural production and symbolic representation, not a *determinate* meaning, or even a subject – position (or a subjective activity).

7.   The Logic and Politics of Substitution

The discourse of youth, the notion that youth is, or could be, a subject of history, an agent in national development and political participation or transformation, the *idea* that youth is transcendentally real and efficacious, or that it is a collective singular subject, is the typical dream of presence, the myth of the given, in which reality is directly given to consciousness or to the subject (*parousia*). In the discourse of youth, as I have been using the expression, youth is present to itself: it guarantees the discourses of it, statements about it, and supplies metaphysical sufficiency and guarantee to the idea that youth is a *person*, a *subject* of proposition and action, and the *sign* of potential or actual collective action (national development, youth development, democracy, and political participation).

Now what all these notions foreground is a model of youth as a being which is capable of matching its desires and intentions with its potential (future leadership, vanguard of national development, progress, etc.). This also means that youth is a single, collective subject, a singular entity defined by its (collective) singularity. How this so-called collective singular subject is formed materially, culturally, linguistically, and discursively is never specified. What is more, such a notion of youth does not specify whether its "goal" is social production or only instrumental action in league with its nature and purposes. In any case, any model, theory, or discourse which privileges one social group as the bearer of society or humanity or assumes the existence of an epistemologically transparent structure of self or selves which possesses transparent knowledge for determining what is or will be, or what would actualize its self-becoming, is a form of the "philosophy of the subject"[12].

One philosophic difficulty of this notion is that it is, as Benhabib (1986:135) has pointed out, based on a pre-linguistic model, which proceeds from "a reflecting consciousness formulating its intentions and goals". This reductionist mode of thinking obscures the extent to which human beings attain their dignity as *persons* wholly within the "shared social world" and through "linguistically mediated socialization", not to speak of the cultural-symbolic codes which make human beings subjects. And so by a *miraculous* process, the discourse of youth as a collective singularity has turned its object into a pre-linguistic, pre-social, and *demiurgic* subject (namely that what it is and what it can accomplish in its activity are fundamentally independent of all else).

The flip side of this "messianic" (instrumentalist) notion of youth is the politics of collective singularity, a "mode of politics where one group or organization acts in the name of the whole" (Benhabib 1986: 347). The obvious implications of this are an authoritarian politics in which a singularity or a collective

singularity acts in the name of the whole and imposes the normative standards of conduct or behaviour (which, in their turn, can foster an attitude of dependence and clientalism). Yet the same logic and politics are operative in the notion of youth as an empirical subject, or a social-economic *patient*, needing restitution or reconstruction by state institutions such as the National Youth Policy, the Ministry of Youth Development, Youth Directorates, the National Youth Service Corps, Youth Wings (within political parties), and youth studies in the academia. All this proceeds from the assumption that young people (or youth) possess a normativity in their empirical manifestation.

Quite apart from questions of the inherent interpretive indeterminacy of action (given the interpretive indeterminacy of the life-world), it is philosophically untenable to privilege the particular consciousness, perspectival knowledge, or identity of a group or collectivity, first because consciousness is perspectival (agents know the world through a human perspective, and make distinctions based on the symbolizing systems of socialization), second because knowledge is propositional (which makes immediate knowledge impossible, since there is no Archimedean point outside discourse), third because experience is always already conceptualized (which makes perception subject to multiple interpretations), and finally because meaning is *immanent* (in language, which implies that meaning cannot be anchored to extra-linguistic mechanisms such as physiology or psychology).

The implication of this for the discourse of youth is obvious: there is no identity of subject and action because one cannot predict in advance what a subject or an agent is obliged to do in the light of its subjectivity or "agent-ness" (agency). And since no epistemologically transparent selves (can) exist, not to speak of self-actualizing collectivities or singular collective subjects, then it is a philosophical mistake to assume that there exists a self-knowing organism or collective singularity which can act, or transform society, solely on the basis of its non-signified self-presence or self-presentness (or self-origination) in relation to an action, a goal, or (inherent) purposes.

Even more important: to claim that a group of persons, youth in this case, exist as empirical givens, and as those who have actualized themselves through their *age* or quality (youthfulness, of being *young*) is to claim that their potential, essence, and faculties are identical to their being, existence, action, and doing. This, as said previously, leads to the politics of collective singularity, whereby a singular or a single collective subject acts on behalf of others, or in the name of the whole (humanity, young people, workers, peasants, an ethnic group, etc). There is another name for this: messianic collective singularity, for which there is a man, a group, a collective, within human society whose strategic position or being or

identity or experience uniquely entitles it to represent the whole of society or the plurality.

This, surely, is the *secret* of all the different kinds of the discourse of youth that we have examined: they construct young people as *patients*, namely they are *subjected* to monetized, bureaucratic, instrumental, administrative, and policy-decisions norms of action. All this would only, in the end, impoverish the conditions of young people and foster in them an attitude of dependence, which would also only further limit, and not enhance, their capacity for autonomous and self-creative action. Not only would such instrumentalist conceptions of young people seek to reach decisions at their expense (in the long run), not only would such limit their normative processes of self-transformation through which they may learn to be *modern* subjects, with a capacity for moral, cultural, and political judgement) but would also, while claiming to extend the rights and entitlement of young people, actually diminish their unity-in-difference, their plurality, their particularity, and their *non-identity* with respect to the instrumental reason which drives the discourses of Youth Policies, from the nation-state (Nigeria) to the United Nations. For in the documents and discourses of these institutions, young people are hopelessly bureaucratized, rationalized, and turned into the totally administered objects of modernization and development. This is why the National Youth Policy and others of its kind are no more than the logic of substitution in which actually existing men and women are *displaced* by institutional discourse and reifying philosophies of Instrumentalism and Bureaucracy.

8.   Conclusion

What is left of the concept of youth once it has been shown to be without reference to real subjects in the empirical world? The answer is: not a great deal. However, it is true that young people exist, that is, as human organisms, as *persons*, to whom intentional predicates can be ascribed. It is also true that young people, or youth (as a collective noun), have occupied specific yet contradictory positions in the discursive spaces of institutions from the family, the state, and the market economy to the "disciplines" of biology, physiology, sociology, psychology, and advertising. It is these "discourses" (as heterogeneous statements) that have *produced* and *modulated* our present image and conception of youth. These discourses have not only *displaced* the real, concrete persons that we may regard as young people, but have also produced the modern notion and meaning of youth.

This is why, in the present discourse of youth, the assumed referent, young people or whatever youth may mean in reality, now no longer exists. We cannot now match the concept "youth" with the object; cannot, in other words,

make the concept present to its referent. Thus it is the *discourse* of youth that is now the *subject* rather than youth itself (as a collection of concrete, living persons or individuals) which is, and has become, the *object* of the concept. In this sense, then, the word "youth" is no more than a signifier: it defers the meaning (of youth), and, at the same time, takes its place, thereby representing the absence (young people, the youth) that it evokes. As such, youth (the totality of the real persons) is now a *representation* (of discourse and of the signifier).

To this extent, therefore, youth is, as an analytical or explanatory category, a vacuous concept, and without any analytic significance, for without it having some explanatory force, the concept dissolves into insignificance. And from the point of view of whether young people, youth, can be active agents in political, social, or national transformation, the best the discourse of youth can sustain is the politics of collective singularity in which the needs and interests of a subject represent those of others. But once we stress that one cannot assume young people as a *single* empirical subject, or as a normative subject that can be represented by *one* particular group or collective, then the whole conceptual and praxiological edifice of the discourse of youth collapses into a sign of incoherence.

In the light of the foregoing arguments, youth cannot be an agency of, or for, neither can it (as a collective empirical subject) be mobilized for, an enduring political action— from changing the self-identity of human organizations to the changing of objective structures either for good or for ill. For if we were to ask the question, "in whose name should young people act?", the answer, surely, would not consist in the proposition that it would be in the name of young people themselves, or youth itself — fundamentally because, from a logical and practical point of view, both the question and its possible answer are, as *propositions*, incoherent, meaningless.
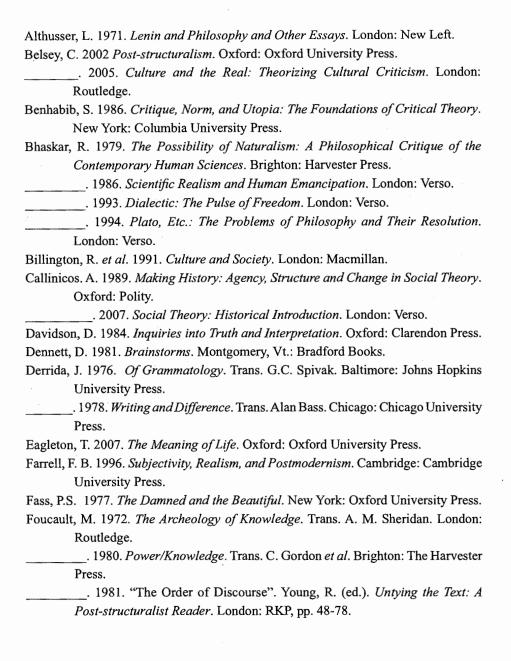
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1. See the *National Youth Policy of Nigeria* (2001). Abuja: Federal Government of Nigeria. I have also relied on the "Second Draft Review of the National Youth Policy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria". (2008; unpublished).These two documents are substantially similar.

2. This kind of critique is also called the "the triple critique" in that it unites conceptual criticism and social-historical criticism, evaluation and explanation. It criticizes its object of inquiry in the very process of explaining it — so that the task of the critic is not just to interpret the object (false and dominatory beliefs and practices) but to change it (that is, to remove its conditions of possibility). Here the conceptual fuses into the historical, and vice versa: conceptual or historical change implies social and institutional change. As a method, meta-critique is an open, non-deterministic, analytic, for it offers the greatest range of real (non-utopian) possibilities that might be available to the critic. For more, see Bhaskar (1986) and Bhaskar (1993).

3. It should be pointed out that physiologists do not use the concept of "youth" as such but that of "puberty" to describe physiological changes in a "developing" human organism; while psychologists are likely to use the concept of "adolescence" to describe the mental-psychological process of becoming in an adolescent subject.

4. This should be distinguished from the post-Romantic, post-Enlightenment philosophic variety of self-creation championed by Nietzsche in which he suggests that we humans should become what we are in the sense of being able to invent ourselves. Here self-creation is to make a work of art of oneself. It is a "passion for self-reference" and self-fashioning, the will to give form to oneself, to be the author of one's life. Nietzsche suggests further that "we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art" (1967a: 52); that *"truth is ugly*... We possess art lest we perish of the truth" (1975: 435). According to Nietzsche, human beings want to be the poets of their life. For more on this, see Eagleton (2007) and Nehemas (1985).

5. This principle is also suggested by the Principle of Charity; and both assume the notion of a common human nature: that, in interpreting the beliefs and interest of subjects, we assume a tacit knowledge of the world and human subjects in general, for only then can we assume their rationality and the intelligibility of their doings and sayings, that is, as agents who are attitudinally and behaviourally rational. For more on this, see Callinicos (2007); Macdonald & Pettit (1981); Wiggins (1980).

6. Davidson argues that since beliefs and meaning conspire to account for utterances, we "cannot infer the belief within having the meaning, and have no chance of inferring the meaning without the belief" (1984: 142).

7. According to Ernst Bloch (cited in Benhabib 1986: 353), social utopia is concerned with *human happiness*, irrespective of any kind of difference between, within, or among human individuals, so that there is no place for the weary and the downtrodden. So by analogy, the utopia envisaged for youth is a *negative* one since it would not be a utopia at all but a circumscribed relativism based on age-identification, which would be incoherent in the discourse of social utopia, or even of natural rights, which assumes *human* dignity.

8. In fact, according to Derrida (1978: 230), the *trace* is "the erasure of selfhood" and of presence, one's own presence, and is constituted by the disappearance of its disappearance. It is not, in other words, "a mortal germ" or a seed, or a substance— all of which are, by comparison, immobile and un-corruptible.

9. In the discourse of youth, the real, young people, are never *sufficient* in themselves, hence the reference, in these discourses, to extra-youth referents such as "development", "national reconstruction", etc. In this case, the very youth or young people, for whom the discourse speaks, become what Derrida (1976: 159) calls "supplements", "substitute significations". The real "thing" (youth) has vanished and now takes on meaning only as a *trace* (the *discursive* reconstructions of the discourse of youth) and *in* the invocation of the supplement (young people). In a word, youth has become, as an empirical subject, no more than a supplementarity (an addition-substitution) to an alien purpose outside the *needs* of young people *qua* young people.

10. I have drastically summarized, and perhaps over-simplified, Foucault's otherwise elegant and sophisticated arguments. For a fuller treatment of the subject, and a critical review of the notions and concepts of discourse and power-knowledge, see Macdonnell (1986) and Mills (1997).

11. This issue turns on the processes by which humans are constituted into subjects. For Foucault it is through discursive practices. For Althusser (1971), individuals are formed into subjects within "ideology". Yet I think neither proposition denies the causally efficacious reality of human beings, their being, by nature, what Bhaskar (1994: 105) calls "geo-historical products".

12. This has two senses: i) the notion of a subject, group, or human structure, as being the foundation of knowledge, meaning, or an inherent purpose given by nature or natural determination; and ii) the notion of a particular group, class, or a collective, or even a particular man or woman, for example, Youth, Women, Men, the Proletariat, Party, Avant-garde Intellectuals, Third World People or Revolutionaries, or the Leader, as the universal hope of human emancipation, as particularity that *represents* universality.

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