

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

HARRY BLATTERER, *Coming of Age in Times of Uncertainty*. New York: Berghahn Book, 2007, xiii + 124 p., index.

In *Coming of Age in Times of Uncertainty* Harry Blatterer addresses the “delayed adulthood” thesis in relation to the storm and stress surrounding the entrance to, and the eventual exit from, adulthood. What is adulthood? Blatterer eloquently begins the text with a reflection on the “traditional” markers of adulthood, including “working nine to five, dinner parties, jury duty, and voting; marriages, mortgages and children; the family sedan, adultery, and divorce; investment portfolios, nest eggs, life insurance, writing a will – these are things we do, strive for or object to, hold dear, or consider commonplace” (1).

This is an engaging text which examines the paradox of adulthood as a contentious stage in the life course. In an attempt towards theory-building, Blatterer orients the study within a social-theoretical perspective. In the introduction, he outlines the myriad definitions of “adulthood.” Scholars acknowledge that these words represent a demarcation from the socially accepted roles and responsibilities of “childhood” and “adolescence.” At the same time, Blatterer recognizes that these traditional markers are not definite by any means. In fact, disparities among gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, employment status, situational contexts, and variations from individual to individual make the definition of adulthood rather inconsistent and non-universal in nature. Moreover, Blatterer explicates how the ambiguity associated with “adulthood” does not account for the oscillation that frequently occurs between adulthood and adolescence. For example, he explains the confusion surrounding the experiences of contemporary individuals in the adult phase of life: a single, professional, individual in his/her 30s is, by biological and traditional definitions, an adult. However, according to the socially constructed characteristics of adulthood, such as marriage and children, Blatterer describes the incongruence between the individual’s actual and supposed adult characteristics. Thus, in some ways, the 30 year old oscillates between the role of an adult (i.e., due to age and attainment of a “good job”) and that of an adolescent (i.e., for not “settling down”).

Consequently, the text attempts to challenge scholars’ and laypersons’ preconceived notions regarding adulthood as a relatively rigid stage within the life course. Moreover, Blatterer juxtaposes the paradox of adulthood in contemporary, (post)modern society. As such, Blatterer addresses a few pertinent themes in the delayed adulthood thesis, including changing social

norms, the role of social recognition, and social conditions. Additionally, he elucidates the conditions of contemporary adulthood, including but not limited to: increased education; delaying marriage and settling down; changing roles and expectations for both men and women; prolonged adolescence which in turn defers the inception into adulthood; and finally, the increasing adherence to the sentiments that “kids grow up too soon these days” and “young people just won’t grow up” (1). Blatterer addresses the need for scholarly concern on issues of delayed adulthood amidst a very different and ever-changing context than that of earlier generations.

The text comprises 6 chapters. Within each chapter, an attempt at theory-building is an omnipresent feature. The first four chapters examine the theoretical literature on the life course, socialization, individualized society and the fundamental shifts in the contemporary life course. Chapter 1 addresses common questions pertaining to adulthood, such as cultural representation, relationships between norms, values and rates of maturity, and the current viewpoints on contemporary adulthood (7). Chapter 2 addresses the social conditions at the root of the changing context of adulthood, such as the diminishment of biographies and the ever-increasing role of uncertainty about oneself in terms of self and identity in light of the “options generation” (31). Blatterer states that the middle chapters reconceptualize adulthood in terms of sociability. As such, chapter 3 examines the role of the adult self vis-à-vis Alex Honneth’s theory of social recognition, emphasizing the role of culture. Chapter 4 expands this agenda with a discussion of the historical development of “youth” as a social construct, linked to the “dynamics of social recognition that are specific to advanced capitalist societies” (8). The remaining two chapters examine the empirical literature collected from twelve in-depth interviews with both male and female respondents from Australia who are between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. These final chapters attempt to link the experiences and configurations of the respondents within the previously described theoretical literature, specifically focusing on the link between social conditions and the new contemporary adulthood.

While this book provides a rather extensive account of the changing definitions of adulthood, well-grounded within the theoretical literature, I would be remiss not to mention two related criticisms of the text. In the introduction, Blatterer acknowledges that the earlier chapters address the how and what questions of adulthood (83), with the remaining two chapters explicitly discussing the lived experiences of his participants. Despite dedicating only two small chapters to the voices of participants, Blatterer argues that “the active progenitors of change are present from the first page to the last” (5). His claim is too overarching and ambiguous: the voices of these participants and accounts of their experiences are often lost within the context of the dense theoretical material of the prior four chapters. In essence, the last two chapters appear rather divorced from the earlier chapters of the book. Greater linkages between the theoretical and empirical data would serve the text well.

As Blatterer admits, theoretical and empirical literature pertaining to adulthood from a socio-theoretical perspective is far from copious. Consequently, he leaves the reader wanting more than a brisk and somewhat aloof account of the participants and their lived experiences, in which the goal of theory building often subverts their voices. Blatterer, for example, associates the individuation experiences of “Fred,” “Ethan,” “David” and “Christopher” within the context of authenticity of the self. These experiences exemplify the role of self-presentation, social acceptability and the role of others in the formation of the self, including that of the adult self. But, as with other discussions and passages in the last two chapters of the text, Blatterer provides only a surface account of the phenomenon (95). Moreover, the text describes many interesting themes which are not further developed, such as the participant named Christopher who refers to a “loss of innocence that comes with attaining a perspective [that says] that the world’s not as it seems” (96). Readers encountering such passages will probably want further description and analysis of these themes and comments. This is a somewhat disappointing aspect of the text, as its quality and utilization would surely increase with further integration of the empirical literature, as well as explication of the interesting themes that participants themselves allude to in the context of their conversations/interviews.

Do Blatterer’s omissions and oversights diminish the value of the text? In general, they do not. However, if the theory-building and empirical research were well-integrated throughout the entire text, an increased readership and applicability of the research would occur. Despite some shortcomings, *Coming of Age in Times of Uncertainty* contributes to research on the life course, adulthood and growing up in the ever-changing contemporary and (post)modern world. While greater reference to the empirical research would increase the usefulness of this text, Blatterer’s extensive review of the theoretical literature will serve the novice academic well. As a result, this book is a good introductory text for those embarking upon the literature in the fields of identity, adulthood and the life course. That being said, this book is ideally suited for those interested in sociology of the family, sociology of youth, adolescence and adulthood, the life course, social construction of identities, and identity politics.

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