Title: Slight Expectations: Working-Class Youth and the Transition to Adulthood?

Abstract

As blue collar jobs disappear, working-class youth are coming of age within a volatile and insecure service sector that offers few benefits, low pay, and little promise of advancement. Consequently, traditional markers of adulthood – leaving home, completing school, establishing financial independence, marriage, and childbearing – have become strikingly delayed or even foregone in the latter half of the twentieth century. This study draws upon 100 interviews with white and black men and women in their twenties to early thirties to investigate the changing meanings and practices of working-class adulthood. I find that working-class young people – the majority of whom bounce from one unstable service job to the next, bearing the burden of risks such as illness or education individually, and racking up credit card debt just to make ends meet – have in large part abandoned the American Dream. In the absence of traditional rites of passage, the majority of respondents embrace a model of therapeutic selfhood – that of an inwardly-directed self preoccupied with its own emotional and psychic repair. Crippled in the present and wary of the future, working-class men and women are redefining competent adulthood in terms of overcoming a painful family past. The therapeutic narrative’s orientation toward personal suffering in the past, however, serves to obscure the shaping power of structural inequalities such as unemployment and racism in the present.