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# A Global Generation? Youth Studies in a Postcolonial World

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**Abstract:** Today's young people navigate a world that becomes simultaneously more interconnected and less capable of silencing long-standing inequities. What analytical perspectives does a sociology of youth and generations require in such a context? This paper makes two suggestions: to conceptualize generations as global rather than regionally bound (cf. Mannheim 1928) and to transgress the colonial bifurcation of academia between sociology for the so-called 'modern' world and area studies and anthropology for the so-called 'developing' world. Drawing from a large body of literature on African youth that has hitherto remained unheeded in youth studies, as well as from postcolonial theory and ethnographic fieldwork in Guinea and Uganda, I argue that academic representations of African youth constitute a particularly insightful repertoire for investigating the methodological challenges and potentials of a global sociological perspective on youth.

**Keywords:** youth; generation; sociology; epistemology; postcolonial studies; Guinea; Uganda; Africa; globalization; Mannheim; Karl

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## 1. Introduction

Youth studies scholarship is currently entering an important debate on the fact that it has routinely studied Northern or Western youth while ignoring the majority of young people living in the so-called Global South [1–3]. Everatt [1] (p. 77), arguing that the concepts of youth studies “must mean something tangible to the teenager in Delhi or Nairobi or Bogota, not just to the academic sitting in London or Melbourne or Manhattan”,<sup>1</sup> has urged the discipline to adopt a more inclusive approach. But how exactly are youth studies going to address youth in the Southern parts of the globe, methodologically and theoretically? Moreover, how come the discipline has ignored them in the first place? What academic literature exists to date about youth in the Global South and could it inform a more general sociological framework? This paper reflects on these questions to deepen the nascent debate in youth studies and connect it with both African Studies and postcolonial studies scholarship on youth. The goal is to carve out the challenges and potentials of a more globally oriented sociology of youth that is both aware of the enormous diversity of what youth and generations may mean today across the globe, and reflexive of how knowledge is produced about them.

In the first section of this essay, I critically consider the concept of ‘generations’. In spite of popular discourses on today's ‘global’ or ‘globalized’ generation, the concept still formally relies on Mannheim's [4] idea that generations exist within fairly homogeneous historical and social units, share a common cultural heritage and engage in transforming it. The problem here is not only that such an idea is inapplicable to postcolonial nation states in the Global South, whose colonial borders have often forced heterogeneous populations to cohabitate and whose creation by an external colonial power contradicts *per se* the idea of self-contained socio-historical units.

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<sup>1</sup> Everatt specifically refers to the concept of belonging [1].

The ultimate conceptual trouble is that the Global South is not an exception in that regard, but rather an indicator of broader global trends [5]. Indeed, Northern societies, too, experience increasing social heterogeneity, and today's transnational dynamics are powerful enough in almost any country to empirically contradict the idea of self-contained socio-historical units. I therefore argue against the regionally based concept of generations and for a stronger focus on Mannheim's epistemological concerns in "The Problem of Generations" (1970 (1928)) [4].

Relatedly, this paper also addresses the institutional causes for youth studies' predilection for the Global North, and the difficulties within contemporary academia to develop an unbiased global outlook. A key concern here is the bifurcation of the social sciences. While sociology and other core disciplines, as well as newer fields such as youth studies, study the so-called modern world, constructing and transforming the leading categories and paradigms of social research, anthropology and area studies specialize in the so-called developing world, the world's "residual" social realities and "deviant" cases [6] (p. 613). This colonial heritage has entertained the idea that the world would eventually become more and more like the West, or else would be of little importance. Today's conjuncture contradicts this myth on several levels. Europe has ceased to be "the center of gravity of the world" [7] (p. 1) and given way to a more plural and precarious global present where multiple and rival futures are pursued [8]. In this postcolonial moment, where the long-silenced history of colonial violence [9–11] returns to haunt the Global North [12] (p. 957), the bifurcation of the social sciences becomes an obstacle to understanding global interdependence, for it has produced different academic communities specialized in different parts of the globe that hardly talk to one another.

As I will demonstrate in the second section of this paper, youth research is a case in point. African Studies research on youth, for instance, arguably represents one of the most productive and innovative fields in area studies, but remains virtually unheeded in youth studies. In turn, Africanists never cared much about insights from youth studies either, because the latter were deemed not to match the specificities of African contexts. More surprisingly, Africanists also paid little attention to non-Africanist research on African youth, particularly by economists and demographers studying population growth and the associated risks of political conflict under the label of 'youth bulge theory', which gained significant prominence in policy circles [13]. I provide a summary overview on these different strands of research to contribute to a more interdisciplinary debate on knowledge production about youth and generations across the globe.

In the final part of this paper, I reflect on fieldwork experiences in my doctoral research [14] that demonstrate the varying suitability of the concept 'youth' in two different contexts. Comparing the role of young men in urban protests in Guinea and Uganda, similar events locally meant very different things because youth and generational change were conceived differently in their respective contexts. I describe these methodological challenges to exemplify the sociological diversity that a globally oriented approach to youth inevitably has to deal with.

## 2. Conundrums of a Global Generation

Youth studies is a multidisciplinary field and 'knows' youth through a variety of approaches [15, 16]. The diversity of these approaches indicates unmistakably the complex nature of what is at stake, including the question of how and whether to generalize about youth. The classic way of generalization—the idea of youth as a universal biological period in human biographies and a transition from childhood to adulthood—has recently come under severe criticism [1,17–19]. Turning from a bio-psychological to a sociological perspective in turn has made some scholars reconsider 'generation' as a conceptual tool [4,20,21]. Drawing notably on Mannheim's essay "The Problem of Generations" (1971 (1928)) [4], their goal is "to develop an understanding of how each generation is located within its social, political and economic milieu" and fosters its own "meaning of age" [22] (p. 497).

Generational perspectives on youth face a critical dilemma, however. For while today's generation of youth is routinely discussed as a 'global' generation [23–28], Mannheim [4] (p. 394) notoriously claimed that generations "must be born within the same historical and cultural region." For a generation

to become an actuality, he argued, a given age cohort must participate in the “common destiny of [the same] historical and social unit” [4] (p. 394). Owing to classic sociology’s embrace of national society as the bedrock of sociological reasoning, Mannheim focused on each generation’s “fresh contact” not with the world at large but with their common region’s cultural “heritage”, which he argued would lead to a “reevaluation of our [cultural] inventory” and facilitate a selection of what needed to be forgotten and what was yet to be acquired, thereby enabling cultural change [4] (p. 384). Yet, almost a century after Mannheim wrote his essay, the idea of a bounded historical and cultural unit seems increasingly problematic [7,29]. The young generation in particular faces a “heritage” that is essentially transnational—whether it regards technological progress or environmental degradation. Young people come into contact anew not only with their own region’s history, but with entangled histories whose origins are scattered across the globe. To different degrees and through different means, they harness and hybridize a diversity of cultural inventories to navigate a world that simultaneously becomes more interconnected and less capable of silencing long-standing inequities.

In this essay, I make the case for detaching the generation concept from the idea of bounded historical and cultural regions. This comes with a significant tradeoff. On the one hand, the concept immediately loses its clear-cut character, its quality of indicating a rather precise category of people in a given society at a given point in history. On the other hand, however, it gains an acute sensitivity to the fact that new generations participate in “common destinies” whose very aim is often to redefine previous notions of historical and social units (take environmental movements, for instance, with their decidedly global outlook, or certain strands of nationalism in Europe which now embrace a continental European identity in the wake of the moral panic surrounding immigration from non-European countries). Researchers may differ in their assessment as to whether such a tradeoff is worthwhile. A key argument in favor of it, however, is that Mannheim himself was not overly concerned with pinpointing generations. For instance, he sidestepped the thorny question of how a specific generation could be situated in history [30,31]. Instead, Mannheim was much more interested in what generational change meant from a sociology of knowledge standpoint [21] (p. 482). His concern was how new members of a society shed new perspectives on things, shaped by growing up in a specific historical period with potentially formative historical events. The contemporary debate on the significance of the Internet and whether ‘digital natives’ “think differently” than their parent generation (Prensky 2001a [32]; see also [33–37]) is indicative in this regard. Epistemologically, Mannheim likened generation to class [4] (p. 23ff.): both, he argued, determine an individual’s position within a social structure, and that position in turn informs the individual’s world views irrespective of his or her choice or consciousness of it (see also Bourdieu [38,39]). Accordingly, Mannheim was intrigued by the epistemological tension between generations, by the risk or inevitability of misunderstanding each other across generations [4] (p. 392).

How today’s youth deal with an increasingly interconnected world is obviously an important aspect of generational change. Previous generations are likely to interpret their surroundings in different ways than today’s young generation whose members experienced in their most formative years the rise of the Internet, the 2008 global financial crisis, as well as the current controversies about transcontinental migration. The new generations’ reactions to such experiences of global interconnectedness are not necessarily an embrace of globalization. Their increasing exposure to the world at large may also entail a retreat into ethnic units, a sort of nationalist backlash, as we can witness in Europe and the United States today. But that changes little with regard to the contention that the underlying social reality to which generations respond today is transnational, and that therefore, the idea of social and historical units as a context for the study of generations is heuristically misleading. Relatedly, we must be wary of the notion of globalization as homogenization [40], the idea that increased intercultural contact will imply some sort of “cultural levelling” (p. 543). However much transnational dynamics may intertwine people and systems of meaning, and however much today’s cultural resources are virtually shared across the globe, one must not forget that these resources are interpreted and “put to use in radically different ways” [41] (p. 543). A globally oriented

approach to youth and generations thus needs to be extremely nuanced in reconciling its highlighting of transnational dynamics with the fact that they are experienced locally in very different ways.

Unfortunately, contemporary youth studies are poorly equipped to develop such a nuanced perspective on a global scale. All talk about today's 'global youth' notwithstanding [23–26,28,42,43], data on young people are still mostly collected and evaluated in the Global North, and youth studies concepts, theories, and approaches, while often treated as universally valid, are in fact locally specific, i.e., rooted in European, North American, and Australian historical experiences and conceptualizations of youth [2,3,15]. Though these issues are only starting to emerge within youth studies [1–3,15], they are likely to gain prominence in the future. For it is only too ironic, as Everatt [1] observes, that youth studies, a field so acutely aware of social exclusion, tends to focus on social exclusion only within the confines of their respective Northern or Western societies. Exclusion on a global scale is ignored at best, Everatt argues; at worst, it is reified by effectively denying relevance to the Global South and reducing its youth to "objects of distant fascination, fear, or voyeuristic peeking" [1] (p. 64).

While Everatt's critique is appropriate, his statement is not entirely true. As the following section demonstrates, there has been substantial research on African youth [28,42,44–58] that has gone way beyond voyeuristic peeking and simply been ignored by youth studies scholarship. The problem here is not a lack of academic attention, but the academic treatment of Euro-American and African youth as two unrelated objects of research. A legacy from colonial times, it evidences the troubling academic bifurcation between sociology for the 'modern' world versus anthropology and area studies for the 'developing' world. Paradoxically, this academic bifurcation continues to feed off and to feed into the idea of bounded and internally homogenous social spaces, be they Africa [59], the Orient [60], or Latin America [61], while routinely glossing over histories of transcontinental migration, colonialism, racism and economic exploitation that are constitutive of today's nation-states, whether in the Global North, the Global South, or somewhere in between that dichotomy [9–11]. Today, as the legacies and continuations of that violent transcontinental history flare up, not least in Europe [62–64] and the United States [65,66], such bifurcation is no longer tenable, least of all in research on today's generation of youth who face an essentially global and disturbingly violent "heritage" that requires a globally oriented, less biased research perspective.

How to arrive at such a perspective within youth studies is contested. Everatt, tracing a "new direction" for youth research, demands a more inclusive approach to youth beyond the Western, industrialized regions of the world [1] (p. 77). Youth studies and its concepts, he argues, "must mean something tangible to the teenager in Delhi or Nairobi or Bogota" and should be animated by "the basic tenet of global justice" [1] (p. 77). They should highlight the local dynamics of how young people are excluded as an effect of global dynamics of exclusion driven by dominant Western forces and interests [1] (p. 77). Unfortunately, Everatt fails to specify the directionality of his inclusive approach. He ignores the very likely scenario that including Southern youth into youth studies risks transforming them into a kind of "ethnographic minutiae" from which youth studies might further seek to justify the purportedly transcendent nature of its theories [5] (p. 1) rather than causing the discipline to reflect upon its Northern biases. The same has happened in research on globalization, where conceptualizations of 'global society' conspicuously resembled earlier versions of national, metropolitan societies situated in the Global North [67], or in research on urbanity, where studies of non-Western cities long focused on chaos and political failure [68] rather than exposing the blind spots of mainstream understandings of urbanity [69].

Cooper et al. [2] in turn argue for a "disparate theorizing" about Southern youth rather than an inclusive approach. Instead of expanding youth studies towards the Global South, their idea is to trace a disparate "Southern youth studies project" [2] (p. 17) that takes into account the systemic differences between the lives of Southern youth and those of their Northern counterparts. The authors illustrate these differences through a variety of descriptive statistics on demographics, youth employment, education, poverty, crime, and violence among youth, as well as through the Human Development Index (HDI). Since youth evidently face harsher socio-economic realities in the Global South than in

the Northern parts of the world, Cooper et al. argue that these “pioneers in precarious places” need to be analyzed with different, or at least significantly adjusted, theoretical tools [2].

In this paper, I advocate a third approach, which is to engage with academic representations of African youth as a means of assessing the methodological challenges and potentials of youth scholarship beyond the Global North. Such an approach synthesizes the suggestions made by Cooper et al. [2] and by Everatt [1]: it reflects on existing “disparate” scholarship on Southern youth to then critically discern how to “include” them in a global debate. My conclusion, however, differs considerably from those of my colleagues. Though I agree with Cooper’s [3] call for institutional changes and the “democratization” of youth studies, I am skeptical with regards to the merits of disparate theorizing. While it has produced an impressive body of literature within the confines of African studies, that literature has largely been ignored outside of Africanist circles and therefore lacked a critical impact on its broader academic environment. Furthermore, such scholarship has implicitly accepted the idea of a particular, typically ‘African’ youth, as if things were largely the same ‘in Africa’ and significantly different from the rest of the world. The same problematic effect, I believe, would haunt the academic separation between research on Northern and Southern youth. Concerning Everatt’s [1] call for a more inclusive approach, I reiterate that we first need to understand what caused youth studies to ignore youth in the Global South in the first place to then discuss more seriously the methodological and theoretical modalities of a more inclusive perspective. This would obviously include studying the literature that has already been written about youth in the Global South and see how it can be improved.

That is the task of the following section. It sketches out two different strands of scholarship on African youth. The first is development and security research by economists and demographers. Relying on a quantitative approach, such research mainly measures the potential effects of Africa’s massive youth population—the so-called “youth bulge”—on the risk of conflict [70–75]. In the second part, I outline qualitative scholarship on African youth in African Studies and anthropology, which also informs my own research on young people in Guinea [57,76–78]. Here, youth has become a new conceptual lens through which new perspectives on contemporary Africa have emerged, especially on politics and popular culture. Scholarship has also entered intriguing conceptual debates about the ambiguity of youth as “a social position which is internally and externally shaped and constructed” [79] (p. 11).

Both strands of research, I argue, are important to consider, though for different reasons. The youth bulge debate shows that the framing of an object of research is at least as important as the object itself, and that such framing oftentimes bespeaks prevailing concerns of the Global North. Youth bulge theory, for instance, draws on particular American fears surrounding race and crime, and constitutes a global upscaling of a previous approach that focused on the United States. Africanist qualitative scholarship in turn should be considered on a variety of levels. First, it has developed valuable insights from ethnographic research and conceptual debates that could enhance a more general debate on youth [80]. Secondly, it displays an empirical and conceptual diversity of what youth can mean—in Africa and therefore in the world—which a globally oriented research agenda inevitably has to come to terms with [81]. Finally, and on a more critical note, Africanist youth research may serve as a case to remain doubtful about the neutrality and the intrinsic heuristic value of the youth concept. It is hardly reflected in the field, but African youth research has insufficiently considered the limits of its conceptualization of youth, and largely ignored the places where youth is understood differently from what the academic literature suggests. As I have argued elsewhere [54], comparative research can shed light on such blind spots. In the third and final part of the following section, I will thus share some of my difficulties doing comparative fieldwork in Guinea and Uganda, where ‘youth’ meant two considerably different things.

### 3. African Youth: A Shifting Concept

African youth research is voluminous [28,42,44–58] and has largely become self-referential [49,54]. The reasons for its popularity and for the heightened interest in African youth are obvious: the continent's overall population has a median age of below twenty, compared to the world's average of over thirty. Whereas youth populations will shrink across the globe, Africa's youth will continue to grow. The UN predicts that more than half of the world's population growth will be in Africa by 2050 and that its youth will increase from roughly 212 million today to about 391 million by 2050. But Africa comprises diverse trajectories and any attempt of generalizing about 'African youth' is basically nonsensical [81]: consider Nigeria being one of the world's fastest-growing telecommunications markets versus the fact that the 19 lowest-ranked countries on the Human Development Index are currently African. Accordingly, there is continuous disagreement over whether Africa's "youth bulge" constitutes a ticking time bomb [70–75] or whether the "youth dividend" constitutes "a window of opportunity" [82] (p. 1). Consensus is confined to the fact that youth is a decisive category, and various disciplines have harnessed it to make sense of the present and future dynamics on the continent.

#### 3.1. Youth Bulge Theory: Fearing Africa's Young Men

Politically speaking, the most important framing of African youth revolves around the notion of the "youth bulge" [70–75]. Developed in 1985 by Gary Fuller when he was a visiting scholar at the CIA [13], and later advanced by demographers, economists, and military analysts, it has become a prominent tool for predicting security threats on the basis of population growth. Based on statistics and econometric models, the overall argument is that a high youth population elevates the risk of violent conflicts. Urdal [73] (p. 96) goes as far as to specify that for "each percentage-point increase of youth in the adult population, the risk of conflict increases by more than 4 percent." Given such catchy formulas, youth bulge theory has become a highly influential approach in policy circles, notably with regard to the Middle East and Africa.

Interestingly, the youth bulge approach gained prominence alongside with the "super-predator" theory in the United States. The super-predator theory was advanced, amongst others, by former Princeton professor John DiIulio, who provided scientific backing to a moral panic surrounding race and youth violence in the United States in the 1990s. DiIulio proclaimed the advent of "a new generation of street criminals [ . . . ] the youngest, biggest and baddest generation any society has ever known" [65]. Like the proponents of the youth bulge theory, he "equated a rise in the proportion of young men in a given population with a rise in the numbers of criminal young men" [13] (p. 3), which, DiIulio presumed, are "growing up essentially fatherless, Godless, and jobless", show no remorse whatsoever, and which DiIulio suspected to emerge especially from "black inner-city neighborhoods" [83]. The super-predator theory informed the so-called War on Drugs and the rise of the prison-industrial complex, but later proved entirely false. Crime rates had already started to drop in the United States when DiIulio warned of an imminent criminological disaster [84].

Compared to the super-predator theory, youth bulge theory is concerned with a more global kind of political instability. An important source of inspiration in this regard, at times explicitly cited in academic writings among youth bulge theorists [81], is Robert D. Kaplan's (1994) famous essay "The Coming Anarchy" [85]. In apocalyptic prose, Kaplan argued that overpopulation and environmental disasters, paired with organized crime, social disintegration, state decay, porous borders, and the like, would overwhelm African states and eventually the world. He situates the beginnings of this global meltdown in West Africa, "a dying region" whose "hordes" of young men are like "loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid, a fluid that was clearly on the verge of igniting." Kaplan also made a direct connection between West Africa and the United States:

The spectacle of several West African nations collapsing at once could reinforce the worst racial stereotypes here at home. That is another reason why Africa matters. We must not kid ourselves: the sensitivity factor is higher than ever. The Washington, D.C., public school

system is already experimenting with an Afrocentric curriculum. Summits between African leaders and prominent African-Americans are becoming frequent, as are Pollyanna-ish prognostications about multiparty elections in Africa that do not factor in crime, surging birth rates, and resource depletion. [ . . . ] Africa may be marginal in terms of conventional late-twentieth-century conceptions of strategy, but in an age of cultural and racial clash, when national defense is increasingly local, Africa's distress will exert a destabilizing influence on the United States.

Turning Huntington's (1993)<sup>2</sup> prognosis of a "Clash of Civilizations" into a warning of civilizational collapse both abroad and at home, Kaplan's essay attracted a broad and politically influential readership. According to anthropologist Paul Richards, who at the time did fieldwork in Sierra Leone, "The Coming Anarchy" was "widely circulated to American diplomatic posts and apparently had been read by senior people in the Clinton Administration" [88] (p. 57). Richards later responded to Kaplan in his book "Fighting for the Rain Forest" [89], now a classic in African studies. The book highlights the specific causes and local dynamics of political conflict in Sierra Leone to demonstrate that it was "a mistake to try and generalize [it] into something generic" [88] (p. 57).

Various other scholars have attacked Kaplan's view of African youth as indicating "The Coming Anarchy" ([90] (p. 183); [91] (p. 278); [70] (p. 15)). Youth bulge theory, the quantitative offspring of Kaplan's apocalyptic journalism, has however been strangely ignored by Africanist scholarship, although it is widely used by policy makers and would deserve a serious debate on a variety of issues [75]. For instance, does youth bulge theory not wrongly rely on aggregate national data that glosses over critical variations within countries, within cities, and across different youth categories, all of which might indicate something important about the relation between youth and conflict [82]? What does an entirely de-contextualized theory do in the sense of knowledge production and what is it politically useful for? Raising these questions could have furthered an important debate on quantification as "a technology of distance" [92] (p. ix) as well as its role in international development politics [93–96], for while experts have substantially questioned insights drawn from development statistics in Africa [93,94], the latter are still cited and believed to inform far-reaching policy recommendations on the continent.<sup>3</sup> Africanist research, however, has not been overly concerned with youth bulge theory and the quantification of youth-related issues, perhaps because it had already established its own agenda: almost exclusively qualitative, based on ethnographic fieldwork and intimate knowledge, it would see youth "as a window to understanding broader socio-political and economic transformations in Africa" [97] (p. 1).

### 3.2. Ambivalent Youth: Makers and Breakers

One major publication for qualitative youth scholarship in Africa is Honwana and de Boeck's edited volume "Makers and breakers: children & youth in postcolonial Africa" [50]. Like other important works, it stresses ambivalence as one of the new hallmarks of Africanist youth research.<sup>4</sup> In their introduction, Honwana and de Boeck caution: "children and youth are extremely

<sup>2</sup> Huntington's 1993 article in *Foreign Affairs* "The Clash of Civilizations?" [86] was the precursor to his later book, which had the same title but missed the question mark at the end [87].

<sup>3</sup> The mismatch between the limited validity of development statistics and their frequent use in development politics and in the mass media is blatant. By 2011, for instance, only "seventeen of the forty-seven [sub-Saharan African] countries had prepared estimates" of their GDP for any of the two previous years [93]—an interesting detail when thinking about the 'Africa Rising' narrative. Most surprising, however, is that the capacity of national statistical offices, often staffed by only a few individuals who lack both the equipment and staff to accomplish foundational statistical tasks, often deteriorated as a direct result of the IMF's and World Bank's structural adjustment programs, which demanded African governments to cut their public spending [93]. Whether such consequences were unintended or not, they suggest that the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are in fact operative without credible empirical data, and this in turn evokes a number of important political and epistemological questions.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Abbink and van Kessel's "Vanguard or Vandals" (2005); "Promise or Peril" by Muhula (2007); or "Hooligans and Heroes" (Perullo 2005). Richter and Panday [98] (p. 292) have described youth as Janus-faced actors.

difficult to pin down analytically [since] they often occupy more than one position at once" [97] (p. 3). Such caveats resonated on both theoretical and empirical levels. Theoretically, they opposed the Afropessimist scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s, which had either ignored youth or one-sidedly cast them as a "lost generation" [99], "easily manipulated" by political elites and therefore unable to bring about social change [100] (for an exception, see Mbembe 1985 [76]). On an empirical level, and perhaps more importantly, the caution was due to the particular diversity of what youth and generational relations may mean in Africa, even within single countries. "Who may be considered to be youth," Durham demonstrates in Botswana, "is highly contested and rapidly changing" [101] (p. 590). On a continental scale, age categories and their respective social roles differ considerably between societies in West Africa and the Bantu linguistic groups in Eastern and Southern Africa, for example [102]. This, however, does not imply that specific age systems overlap easily with ethnic or linguistic groups. In North East Africa, for instance, they frequently transcend ethnic boundaries [103] and structure political conflict not only within, but also across societies [104]. On a micro-level, moreover, youth denotes a relational status vis-à-vis elders rather than age, and thus can be applied to a broad range of individuals, including to people in their early fifties. Youth thus constitutes a "social shifter" essentially inscribed into intergenerational relations [101], and constitutes means of strategically positioning the self and others in negotiations over authority and responsibility. As such, it is a category under constant reconfiguration, gaining new meanings under new circumstances and when intersecting with other social categories, be it class, gender, education levels, or urban or rural settings. As Mbembe [76] (p. 6) clarifies, youth constitutes a heterogeneous and fragmented social universe rather than a clear-cut generational unit.

It is a curious twist that, as much as authors highlight that "we know remarkably little about [children and youth], in Africa as elsewhere" [97] (p. 2), youth has nonetheless become a significant entry point for knowledge production in African studies. Key to this was a fresh focus on young people's agency and creativity, which, in the face of most adverse conditions, situated them "at the forefront" of emerging sociabilities where young people "create, re-invent, and domesticate global trends into local forms" [97] (p. 1–2). Youth thereby enabled a new, more dynamic perspective on Africa. Highlighting their agency in "interaction with structural elements" of postcolonial societies [105] (p. 9) made these structural elements legible not as fixed determinants of action, but as dynamic social fields [106,107] that were constantly changing, appropriated, and re-interpreted by (young) people. The structural elements under scrutiny included unregulated urbanization [108–110], patronage networks [45,76,99], overburdened education systems and informal labor markets [51,58], as well as political conflict and civil war [76–78,111–116]. Research evidently featured an early preference for spectacular topics, often focusing on young males in some sort of conflict. While this has rightfully been criticized as potentially "enshrining the continent in a mystique of otherness and exoticism" [117] (p. 315), the goal of such research was usually quite the opposite: to ground analyses of political violence in ethnographies of young people's quotidian experience. Contrary to the generalizing arguments about endemic corruption and African "neo-patrimonialism" as the hotbed of violent conflicts [100,118–121], ethnographers of youth in violent settings attempted to show that these were in fact normal young people responding to exceptional circumstances [53,89,115].

If youth has invigorated a new curiosity in African societies beyond previous conceptualizations, it also suffered from a lack of "conceptual clarity" [122] (p. 5). Given that youth was defined as ambiguous from the start [44,50], it could accommodate multiple meanings, and thus lent itself as a versatile tool to researchers who could always fall back on the notion of youth representing both vanguard and vandals [105] (p. 22). The problem of that diffuse notion was that it remained unclear whether youth meant all young people or only those who were specifically termed youth, i.e., whether

it was an empirical or a discursive phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, there was little methodological discussion on the ‘work’ that the youth category did as a heuristic tool: its singling out of a particular part of the population, designating it as an excluded or marginalized “numeric majority” in African societies ([105] (p. 11); [76] (p. 7)). I stumbled upon this problem in my doctoral research, which set out to compare the social formations of young men that were involved in urban protests in Conakry and Kampala, the capital cities of Guinea and Uganda, respectively. It is illustrative of both the diversity of youth and the concept’s implicit epistemological baggage.

### 3.3. *Dealing with Diversity: Comparing Youth in Guinea and Uganda*

My initial research on Conakry’s youth was published under the telling title ‘Ambivalent Rage’ [71]. It embraced the above-mentioned ‘makers and breakers’ approach and held that Conakry’s young men from the urban margins entered political protests both out of conviction and because politicians paid them to do so, arguing explicitly against the idea that one precluded the other. Yet, when I later tried to compare the case of Conakry with Kampala, where similar dynamics could be observed [124–126], and hoping to arrive at a more general understanding of urban youth and protests, I was stunned to find out just how differently youth could be conceptualized in the two countries.

In Guinea, youth had been a key social category since independence [127–129]. The country’s first President, Sékou Touré, saw young people as the embodiment of the newly independent nation. “We can say,” he wrote, “that the nation itself is young. It is young because it has just entered a new life, because the structures forming it today didn’t exist a few years ago . . . [because] its new methods correspond to a deep transformation of the past” (cited by Straker [129] (p. 41)). When Touré died during a heart surgery in 1984, and was succeeded by General Lansana Conté, the country turned from socialist state control to liberal laissez-faire, and was flooded immediately with cultural goods from the previously vilified West. Youth, and particularly urban youth, witnessed an ever-increasing availability of foreign television channels, films, cassettes, and CDs, and discovered and identified with new cultural tastes. They felt a growing distance from their parents’ generation. As one of the country’s early rappers, Masthogui from the group Demonix, recalls: “if [...] you were young, in your head you told yourself ‘yeah, man, those who have lived under Sékou [Touré], ya know, that’s the old ones, that was a dictatorship, they didn’t live well. Now, this is our time, we must live our era!” [71] (p. 99). In the new millennium, however, the Conté regime sunk deeper and deeper into corruption, inflation soared, and the revolutionary character that the state under Sékou Touré had vested in youth ultimately turned against the state in numerous demonstrations starting in 2006 against the regime of Lansana Conté. Although the unrest was accompanied by riots and looting, youth were widely seen as the vanguard in the Guinean people’s fight for democracy and for the rule of law. Guinean journalists often interchangeably employed the terms ‘youths’ and ‘demonstrators’ [71] (p. 49) and, as in some of the Africanist literature, political conflict was frequently depicted as a youth vs. state antagonism:

Nothing will be as before, under the current as well as under future regimes. By defying the state forces [...] the citizens, and particularly the youth, have overcome and destroyed a myth. The myth of fearing to challenge authorities, to exercise one’s citizen’s rights. The youth have understood that freedom is being gained by bravery [...], by sacrificing one’s blood.<sup>6</sup>

The case of Conakry’s protesting youth between 2006 and 2009 provided a surprising consistency between how youth defined themselves, how they were seen by their environment, and how

<sup>5</sup> Though in the more rigorous conceptual debates, authors defined youth mainly as a discursive phenomenon (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2005 [123]; Durham 2004; Honwana and de Boeck 2005a; van Dijk et al. 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Sylla, Bengaly. 2007. “Enfin, les libertés retrouvées!” *Le Lynx* 774: 5, my translation from French. For more examples of journalistic youth narratives, see Philipps (2013a: 49).

youth were discussed in the Africanist literature, notably including implicit overtones from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) which had long associated youth with counterhegemonic and politicized subcultures [97,130,131].

In Uganda, 'youth' was different. It was much less prominent in public discourse, and associated with different concerns. The two main areas where it was evoked were party politics (Youth Members of Parliament, Youth Leagues) and entrepreneurship (the Young Achievers Awards, the Youth Venture Capital Fund). Youth was broadly conjured to highlight the continuation of the present, a foundation for continued national development. Though Ugandan history features instances where youth explicitly challenged older generations' outdated political leadership (e.g., in the interwar period between 1920 and 1940 [132,133]), the political use of notions such as 'youth' and 'generation' tends to be confined to strategic political competition between younger and older political rivals at the elite level, while mass protests and militant antagonism are usually framed in terms of ethnicity or political parties [134]. Uganda's recent history is important in that regard. President Museveni is the political offspring of a system of youth cadres, nurtured by former President Milton Obote within the UPC party, the Uganda People's Congress. When Museveni later turned against Obote in the notorious Bush War (1981–1986), his National Resistance Army (NRA) relied on a significant number of youth and children [135]. But the fact that these soldiers were youngsters remained conceptually irrelevant, for it was the 'army' that won the war, and it continues to be the 'army' and the 'military' that constitute key categories in the country's political-symbolic order, heroizing the soldier figure across popular culture and dominating the field of politics [136–138].

Curiously, the only region where the concept of 'marginal youth' seemed somewhat popular was Northern Uganda, where NGOs had used it to attract foreign aid after the civil war with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).<sup>7</sup> It was, in short, a category for Western publics and development institutions. The fact that I broadly subscribed to that conceptualization as a researcher in Kampala provoked irritation. Yusuf Serunkuma from Kampala's Makerere University argued in a conversation that, to him, 'youth' seemed like a discursive instrument that helped foreign observers to falsely dissect a blended Ugandan population into distinct generations.<sup>8</sup> From a Foucauldian point of view, he made me realize, youth was not a neutral, descriptive concept, but a conceptual tool to develop a topography of power. Youth connoted the margins in that topography, which, aligned with transnational (or Western) cultures, directed its social criticism at a national center. In short, the target was again the African state, only that this time, the critique was formulated through a concept that could claim to come from within African societies, and was therefore all the more legitimate.<sup>9</sup>

Sensing that 'youth' was not a helpful category for describing urban unrest in Kampala, I sought to abandon it. But it proved difficult. Searching for alternatives, I realized the extent to which youth had filtered and structured my interpretations of a variety of issues—not just of protests—and these issues turned nebulous without it, disintegrating into diverse concerns, histories, and coincidences that made no sense together, or rather, whose legibility seemed so arbitrarily dependent on any alternative lens I would employ. Eventually, the ensuing confusion inspired the formulation of a 'crystallization' approach to urban protests [126,139], an approach that reflexively looks at conceptualization as a co-constitutive process to urban unrest. But still after that change of perspective, I remained astonished that Uganda, a country that had recently experienced complex political conflicts [125,140,141], with one of the world's youngest populations and one of the world's longest-serving presidents, could evolve without open inter-generational conflict. That was in 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Conversation with Adam Branch, Kisementi, Kampala, 20 March 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Conversation with Yusuf Serunkuma, Makerere, Kampala, 22 March 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Durham (2000: 113) makes the point that youth tend to be problematized in terms of their "incomplete subjugation" and their need of "containment." Calling for a stronger/better African state that is capable of containing its risky youth is a handy political argument for all kinds of interventionism.

In July 2017, the ‘Ghetto President’ became a member of the Ugandan Parliament. Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, a.k.a. Bobi Wine, a popular rap, reggae, and Afrobeat musician and one of the few prominent politically critical voices in the Ugandan music industry [142], won the seat for Kampala’s Kyadondo East constituency. Since then, youth and generation have made headlines. Right after the elections, President Museveni wrote a public statement on youth and politics, arguing that it was young leaders with a lack of ideological principles who had driven the country into crisis in the 1960s and that “biology is not enough” to advance Ugandan politics [143]. Bobi Wine responded in a public letter the next day [144]. Contradicting Museveni’s insinuation “that the present young people lack in ideology”, he instead suggested that generation and ideological change were linked:

Our society has moved on and new issues are emerging. The generation of the 1960s and 1970s had to respond to challenges of that time and we are grateful to those of you who rose to the occasion and played a role. However, the challenges of our time require a new kind of ideology and approach. We are talking about a generation where technology is evolving at a terrific speed. A generation which must struggle with the effects of climate change! Today’s generation has to deal with complex issues in science and technology. Young Africans must find out what economic models work best for their times and work hard to improve the living conditions of our people [144].

The ongoing political debate on youth and generation in Uganda underscores that how young people are represented is rapidly changing [101] and that it can differ tremendously from one context to the next. The category of ‘African youth’ is somewhat misleading in that regard, for the diversity of what youth means on the continent could suffice to drop the ‘African’ prefix. Unfortunately, there has not been a debate in African studies as to how and whether insights from African youth research can feed into a more globally oriented debate on youth. The focus on what youth meant in and for ‘Africa’ simply absorbed most of the intellectual attention. Scholarship thus never really escaped its embeddedness in area studies. It is still part of the troubling academic bifurcation between sociology for the ‘modern’ world versus anthropology for the ‘developing’ world. Thereby, the notion of ‘African youth’ too often had the banal effect of designating a social category on the entire African continent that was somehow distinct and crucial for Africa, a category that moreover proved particularly accessible to foreign researchers, and whose distinctness was quickly associated with marginalization (for a counter argument, see Philipps 2017 [57]).<sup>10</sup> In certain ways, Africanist youth scholarship thus may have been “too concerned with Africa” and not sufficiently concerned with youth [145], in the sense that its insights were too often generalized across the continent and kept isolated within it. Entering non-Africanist debates could help African youth scholars advance beyond the nagging and problem-oriented narratives surrounding Africa, and inversely enrich youth studies with intimate understandings of the complexities and diversities of what youth can be.

#### 4. Conclusions

This paper alluded to a nascent debate within youth studies about how to develop a more globally oriented perspective on youth. It addressed two underlying concerns: the question of conceptual validity across different social and geographical contexts and the problem of institutional barriers between academic disciplines in the study of different parts of the world. Conceptually, I focused on the idea of generations, questioning Mannheim’s precondition that generations had to be born within the same social and historical region and share a common cultural heritage [4]. Such a notion, I argued, is unsuited for analyzing not only the culturally heterogeneous societies of the Global South but today’s transnational context in general. The Global South, with its transnational and colonial history,

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<sup>10</sup> My cross-continental comparative research about rioters in England and Guinea [57] indicates that European youth felt more marginalized from their national politics than their African counterparts.

is not an exception to the sociological rule here, but indicative of broader global trends [5]. This should put into question the very assumption that processes towards greater conceptual validity across different contexts come from the Global North to eventually embrace the South. In fact, given that the social sciences have thus far reasoned almost exclusively from the North, Southern perspectives are more likely to entail particular elucidation. Considering Area Studies scholarship both as a corrective and a source of inspiration for youth studies can thus be a fruitful starting point to develop more inclusive concepts and understandings of youth, in particular when aligned with postcolonial theory, which has challenged the conventional North-South directionality of theory-building in manifold ways,<sup>11</sup> and has unequivocally demonstrated that global reasoning requires a solid epistemological foundation. As Souleymane Bachir Diagne [155] (p. 7) put it, it is “only in a postcolonial world [that] the question of the universal can truly be posed”.

On a more institutional level, and this leads us to the second concern of this paper, the nascent debate in youth studies thus hints at the need to overcome the academic bifurcation between sociology for the ‘modern’ world versus anthropology and area studies for the ‘developing’ world. Concerning youth, this institutional division has led to a bizarre separation of scholarship. Youth studies research on young Euro-Americans and anthropological research on African youth draw from two almost unrelated bodies of literature. Youth studies’ neglect of Africanist youth research, which today builds on a voluminous literature, is all the more astonishing, since youth studies scholars are explicitly calling for more research on youth in the Global South. While this paper has only superficially sketched out the broadest contours of the Africanist field, it hopefully inspires some of the non-Africanist readers to explore it further (for broader literature reviews and foundational texts, see [28,42,44,46,49,50,54,76,79]).

Area studies scholarship, in turn, should find in postcolonial scholarship the incentive to think beyond their prescribed disciplinary boundaries and make inroads into the general discussion on youth. Ultimately, the present bifurcation between mainstream academic disciplines and area studies needs to be transcended from both sides of the divide and with an explicit understanding of the shared responsibility for developing a better and less biased social science of youth. As Macamo [156] has insightfully stated, no knowledge production can extract itself from the legacies of racism and colonialism engraved in the origins of the humanities and the social sciences. They are simply too present in our conceptual and institutional dilemmas. As much as we may want to distance ourselves from them, we must acknowledge these legacies to advance beyond them.

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<sup>11</sup> Key works include Chakrabarty’s (2007) “Provincializing Europe” [146], Comaroff and Comaroff’s (2012) “Theory from the South” [5], and Connell’s (2006, 2007) accounts of how social theory [67] and globalization theory [147] argue from Northern vantage points, as well as her alternative approach “Southern Theory” [148]. It should be added that these different approaches are fairly heterogeneous and are hotly debated within the field [12,149]. For the debate on ‘Theory from the South’, for instance, see Aravamudan (2012); Ferguson (2012); Mbembe (2012b); Obarrio (2012) [150–153]. The Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism organized a whole symposium on the Comaroffs’ “Theory from the South” available online as an edited collection of essays [154].

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