Introduction

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The purpose of this special issue is to explore and question the link between generation and change and look at the ambiguous and troubled relationship between youth and social and cultural change in contemporary Africa[1]. The challenge we take up is that of assessing the role of youth in social transformation processes, getting rid of the pitfalls of notions of *modernity* or *modernisation* as theoretical tools, but without overlooking the remarkable cultural dynamics that characterise contemporary Africa. While it is indeed untenable to understand contemporary Africa in terms of *modernity*, we cannot overlook that the African present has much to do with the impact of and reaction to expansive markets, mass media and commoditisation, and with colonial and postcolonial Euro-American expansion. Nor can we ignore the powerful hold that the *idea* of modernity has in many popular fields of discourse, in local contexts, state policies and international institutions.

If we consider the condition of young people in Africa[2], we rapidly realise that youth is one of the major issues in the continent today[3]. The question is that of the problematic insertion of large numbers of young people in the socio-economic and political order of post-independence Africa. Even educated young people are today confronted with a lack of opportunities, blocked social mobility and despair about the future. In urban areas throughout the continent they seem constrained to remain young (dependent, deficient, single, etc.) with no easy access to wages, marriage or autonomous residence, in a condition that Henrik Vigh has powerfully defined as a social moratorium (Vigh, 2006). African young people, while forming a numerical majority, are largely excluded from power, socio-economically marginalised and thwarted in their ambitions (Abbink and Van Kessel, 2005). Particularly sensitive to the tantalising promises of development and globalisation, they are excruciatingly aware of the incongruence between state modernism and global modernity.

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[1] The original idea for this special issue of *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos* came from the international conference *Youth and Modernity in Africa* that the guest editors organised at ISCTE from 10 to 12 October 2007. The event was prepared jointly by CEA (Centro de Estudos Africanos, ISCTE) and CEAS (Centro de Estudos de Antropologia Social, ISCTE).

[2] It has been frequently underlined that the very category of *youth* lacks a clear absolute definition and that in many situations it may be based on one's social circumstances rather than chronological age (see James, 1995: 45; Wulff, 1995: 6). If we consider youth as both relationally and culturally constructed, it seems very difficult to define it in any general way. Deborah Durham recently proposed, instead of providing a definition, regarding youth "less as a specific age group, or cohort, but as a social «shifter»" (Durham, 2000: 116). In this way, "as people bring the concept of youth to bear on situations, they situate themselves in a social landscape of power, rights, expectations, and relationship" (*Ibid*.).

[3] There is a growing body of literature in anthropology concerned with youth in *Third World* countries and in Africa in particular. See for example Mbembe, 1985; O'Brien, 1996; issues 73: 3 (July, 2000) and 73: 4 (October, 2000) of the *Anthropological Quarterly*, edited by Deborah Durham; issue 80 (December, 2000) of *Politique Africaine* and issue 18 of the journal *Autrepart*, edited by René Collignon and Mamadou Diouf (2001); the volume recently published by Alcinda Honwana and Filip De Boeck (2005); Abbink and Van Kessel 2005.

Despite their structurally critical position however, young people throughout the continent have shown a stunning capacity for local agency, creating, manipulating and inventing new identities and strategies, transforming urban and rural contexts in surprising and unexpected directions. In war zones, migratory paths, villages and shanty towns, young people are strong emerging actors and a consistent theoretical concern emerges in order to show how they are active agents in the construction and manipulation of forms of sociability in contemporary Africa[4]. Dealing with the relics of post-independence modernisation agendas and struggling with the contradictions of the ecumenical ideology of globalisation, young people have appropriated notions of development, modernity and progress, reworking them and at the same time reassessing their future through them, trying to make sense of their dire present condition.

It is in this latter sense – as a concept that is locally appropriated and used for different ends – that we employ the notion of modernity in this issue of *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos*. As an analytical social science tool for understanding change, modernity has received much criticism in recent decades. A keyword in the great narratives of social evolution of European social and political science, this concept proves to be too ideologically biased and theoretically unsuitable to describe social change in Africa. As Fabian claimed, the idea of modernity is one of the most widespread oppressive uses of time through which *others* are constituted as such (1983: 1-2). If there is novelty in the world today, it is difficult to understand the multiplicity of the present in terms of modernity (Appadurai, 1996: 2) without falling back on the pitfalls of modernisation theory.

To overcome the biases of this concept, several authors recently proposed that modernity should be conceived in the plural, and that we should talk of *multiple modernities*[5], thereby destabilising the Eurocentric presuppositions built into this conception by demonstrating that there is far more variety in the way in which the constitutive elements of analytical modernity are configured and experienced than has commonly been grasped (Karlström, 2004: 597). However, Joel Kahn (2001: 659) wonders "if modernity can never be disembedded from particular historical contexts, can it ever be conceptualised in the singular without retreating to the formalistic and procedural notion of a pure modernity?". When dislodged from its socio-evolutionist bias, modernity seems to disappear into thin air (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993: xii; Karlström, 2004: 597). Moreover, the idea of multiple modernities leads us to overlook the unevenness, disempowering

[4] See among others Argenti, 1998; Gable, 1995, 2000; Weiss, 2002; Honwana and De Boeck, 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005.

[5] Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993a: xi. The literature on the subject is vast: see among others Larkin, 1997; Ivy, 1995; Gaonkar, 2001; Eisenstadt, 2001; Lichtblau, 1999; Rofel, 1999; Piot, 1999.

effect and ideological features that *modernity* (in the singular) still has, leading directly to a politically and analytically disabling position (Foster, 2002: 57). This relativising step, claimed Donald Donham, implicitly smoothes out what are actually vast differences in power and wealth in what must be regarded today as an interactive global system: "by pluralising and relativising, it suggests that each modernity is on an equal footing" (2002: 242).

Conceiving modernity in the plural also overshadows the role that the idea of modernity plays for people throughout Africa as a unit of measurement of status in the international hierarchy of nations (Ferguson, 2006: 176-193). Though discarding modernity as an analytical tool, several authors have acknowledged the hold that the *idea of modernity* has in many popular fields of discourse[6]: notions of being and becoming modern and aspirations to become modern have been shown to be a palpable and potent ideology in many if not most world areas (Knauft, 2002: 4). James Ferguson, writing about urban workers of the Copperbelt region, observed that "modernisation had become a local tongue, and sociological terminology and folk classification had become disconcertingly intermingled in informants' intimate personal narratives" (1999: 84). According to Lisa Rofel, "we need to retain the sense of modernity as an ideological trope – both in Europe and elsewhere. More than a specific set of practices, modernity is a story that people tell themselves about themselves in relation to Others" (1992: 96). Modernity appears then to be primarily an interpretative device for social self-reflection. A similar interpretation has been made by Stacy Pigg (1996), who claims that modernity is something like a worldview, "a way of imagining both space and people through temporal idioms of progress and backwardness" (Pigg, 1996: 163), a geography of imagination that creates progress through the projection and management of alterity (Knauft, 2002: 18).

Our attention as social researchers shifts then from modernity as a social and historical process to "the force of the modern as an ideology of aspiration" (Knauft, 2002: 33), particularly with regard to its linear or directional chronotope – the conception of a collective temporal trajectory from an inferior past to a qualitatively different and superior future, often positing a radical disjuncture between the two. What we suggest is that *modernity* is dislodged from our theoretical concerns into ethnographic ones, displaced from theory to practice, following Frederick Copper's suggestion not to find a better definition of modernity, but to listen to what is being said in the world: "if modernity is what they hear, they should ask how it is being used and why" (2005: 115). The major concern therefore is not how to define modernity, whether it is singular or plural, but "how the

[6] See Rofel, 1992; Pigg, 1996; Ferguson, 1999; Schein, 1999.

concept is *used* in the making of claims" (Cooper, 2005: 131). It is only as such, as a claim-making concept and an ideology of aspiration, that modernity can still prove heuristically useful for our understanding of Africa today.

The papers in this volume challenge the categories of modernity and of youth from different perspectives that have enriched the debate on these issues. The first set of essays addresses the question of modernity in Africa as a powerful ideological tool to speak about hierarchy and power, a debate launched by Elísio Macamo to open this volume. Macamo argues that modernity was introduced in Africa by violent European action, first by slavery and later by colonial intervention. However, the same movement refused African modernity as both slavery and colonialism led to the denial of the historicity of African societies. Modernity in Africa was an epitome of the way in which Europeans forced African societies into the capitalist labour market, and the concept was used as a *shorthand for accounting for differences between Africa and Europe*, introducing an ideological difference that led some scholars to reject it altogether. Macamo recognises the ambivalent nature of this concept but still finds some usefulness in it and he stresses the need for a deeper, more detailed analysis of the particular ways the idea of modernity is expressed and reaffirmed in social action. The author analyses the activities of a non-governmental organisation in Mozambique, showing how the concept of modernity – in this example related to the idea of youth – is used as a conceptual tool to create a specific representation of social interaction. Recognising that "the «truth of modernity» refers to the manner in which social categories are defined in accordance with the worldview underlying modernity", youth being a powerful social category to undertake this task, Macamo emphasizes that this concept became an operational notion to justify development agents' interventions. Through a detailed analysis of the construction of youth as a social and intervention category for the NGO considered, he highlights institutions' role in the creation of expressive social representations. Recognising the multiple limitations of the use of the idea of modernity, Macamo nevertheless recognises its importance as a general ideology that underlies and structures social intervention.

Aghi Bahi presents another discussion on modernity as an ideological construction in his essay on young people's social representations in Abidjan. Departing from the broad opposition between *tradition* and *modernity* as a false premise, Bahi chooses to question the places and social practices defined as modern by Abidjan youth. This quest takes him to consider those consumer goods that are defined as the epitome of modernity, namely ICT products. Bahi also recalls that social representations of the modern embody for young people precise spatial

and temporal references, as they are associated to the urban contemporary society. The different interpretations of modernity and the way technologies are appropriated, argues Bahi, are examples of local actors' agency: the concept of modernity is accordingly defined as an *ideafact* which is constantly manipulated and transformed by urban youth in Abidjan. While Bahi's analysis is inspired by Appadurai's reflections on the effects of cultural globalization, his paper leads us to conceive commodities both as social artefacts and as a value that surpasses their phenomenological expression. In Abidjan ICT is used both as an identity marker and an artefact for social interaction.

Ramon Sarró questions the idea of modernity, considering it to be a negotiable reality leading to multiple expressions or different modernities. He believes that modernity is a relative idea that is not exclusive to *modern times* and he questions both the use and definition of this concept starting from the example of the confrontation between young Baga and their elders because of the use of *modern music* and new forms of dance back in the 50s. Basing his argument on this historical vignette, Sarró claims that youth's social resilience is better expressed by the idea of a cyclic generational conflict rather than by the notion of modernity. This sharp essay leads us to a less recognisable but still powerful expression of the modernity debate, significantly questioning the apparently obvious relationship between youth and modernity.

Eric Gable also chooses to question the idea of modernity from a local perspective. His personal view of the Lauje (Indonesia) and Manjaco (Guinea-Bissau) villages offers an innovative approach to one of modernity's epitomes: the question of cosmopolitanism. Defined as a new kind of worldliness, cosmopolitanism has multiple interpretations in different places, as noted both by the Lauje and Manjaco. Starting from their social representations of different globalising processes, Gable questions the idea of a sole cosmopolitanism and proposes a multiple approach to the effects of globalisation.

The main questions addressed in the second set of essays are related to the way in which African youth is actually regarded from the outside. Considered a specific social category, African youth entered the international agenda as a risk group, sensitive to the changes produced by internal turmoil, wars, economic predicament and particularly to the consequences of the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Plans in the 80s and 90s that undermined public education, the public health services and the labour market throughout the continent. While recognising these issues, the contributors to this volume address the issue of youth comparing the abstract assessment of their condition with young people's concrete actions and agency. The article by Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo launch-

es a debate on Pierre Bourdieu's famous phrase, *youth is just a word*, stressing that the idea of youth refers to the social function of a group with ill-defined borders. Ouédraogo proposes a relational definition of this concept, pointing out that the regeneration of social order emerges from a constant confrontation between the young and the old. Offering an analysis of the clash between the social expectations of both groups, the author uses an extensive survey of a neighbourhood in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) to discuss the universality of the idea of *youth* and the need for more detailed studies on this group's historical and structural role.

Lorenzo Bordonaro proposes an analysis of the historical and geopolitical processes that led to the marginalisation of the Bijagos Islands in Guinea-Bissau and discusses the social representation of youth in the small town of Bubaque as part of an *undeveloped* setting. His discussion of the political construction of the notions of marginality and development leads him to a critique of these values as ideological instruments and as expressions of the economic and political violence that local communities face in their daily existence in Guinea-Bissau.

Physical violence represented by civil war is the context addressed by Henrik Vigh. His paper presents the *Aguenta*, a praetorian guard armed by former president Nino Vieira in Guinea-Bissau in an attempt to maintain power over the rebel army in 1998 and 1999. Looking at these young men caught between war and an absence of choice, Vigh subsumes their position as a *dubriagem*, the Guinean Creole term for getting by in unstable conditions. Analysing this term, the author focuses on these young men's praxis and their way of surviving and proposes the concept of *social navigation* for a set of strategies allowing these young men to move through a dubious and declining social setting. While young people participating in warfare are commonly portrayed in western media as characterized by instability and indistinctness, the author demonstrates that for these young combatants participation in the conflict was motivated by the need to escape an absolute lack of social opportunities.

Cristina Rodrigues addresses the problem of youth in and out of war from a different perspective. Her picture of contemporary Angolan youth still echoes a civil war that ended less than a decade ago and that marked several generations in this country. In spite of the different contexts, young people's aspirations in Angola mirror the ones that Ouédraogo reports in Burkina Faso. However, in a country emerging from war, what are seen as false hopes in other contexts – education, employment, social maturity – are still a challenge and a goal in Luanda's streets: Rodrigues' portrait of young Angolan people is marked by the expectancy of a model of society that is regarded as having failed in other settings.

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