

Special issue: The making of youth in violent conflict

By Maarten Hendriks and Julian Kuttig

Youths position themselves at the forefront of contemporary violent conflicts worldwide. While violent conflict has often been used as a synonym for (civil) war, for this special issue, we define it more broadly as conflict that involves (groups of) people resorting to violent action and physical violence against others (Demmers 2016). In various ways, youths take up central positions in violent conflicts that mark our world today: by fighting as soldiers and rebels at the front lines; but also by being active in street gangs, drug cartels, vigilante groups, and ‘terrorist’ organizations; when protesting for human rights, democracy, and climate action, or against police violence, racism and other forms of bigotry; by engaging in political violence as part of student movements; when crossing the Mediterranean in rickety boats or residing in refugee camps, etc. These examples show that whilst in certain contexts youths are deliberately engaged in violent actions against others and vice versa, in other contexts, they position themselves more broadly as agents that navigate violent conflict environments (Vigh 2009).

This special issue aims to contribute to a profound understanding of the role and meanings of ‘youth’ – as a highly contextual social construct – in violent conflict worldwide. Seeking to go beyond the victim/perpetrator dichotomy (De Boeck and Honwana 2005; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2003), as well as the arbitrary and often normatively loaded ‘Global North’ ‘Global South’ opposition, the special issue draws from a range of obvious and less obvious empirical case studies in diverse global contexts, across continents. More specifically, departing from an actor-centred and case-study perspective, the special issue analyses the various ways in which ‘youths’ actively participate in, as well as shape and are shaped by violent conflicts. It does so by examining youth’s social trajectories, life-histories, motivations, practices, ‘cosmologies’ and discourses on them within diverse global contexts of violent conflict.

Following Bourdieu’s (1993) assertion that ‘youth is just a word’, the special issue inscribes itself in a strand of literature that rejects ‘youth’ as a universal biologically determined age group. Instead, it considers youth as a socially constructed and highly contextual category, embodying different meanings, which may vary in time and space, and from society to society and culture to culture. Moreover, youth is a highly heterogeneous category divided along intersectional lines of class, ethnicity, ‘race’, and gender (Kimari, Melchiorre, and Rasmussen 2020; De Boeck and Honwana 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; H. Wulff 1995; Jones and Rodgers 2009).

A profound understanding of the making of youth as a social category in relation to violent conflict is the central node in this special issue. To study youth is to study modes of being and becoming. Both are inextricably tight to relations of power. After all, to call someone ‘youth’ or to define and position oneself as such is to claim power and authority (Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006; Jeffrey 2010; Andersen 2016). Youth engagement in violent conflict is often labelled as illegitimate or even criminal, whether they are categorized as gangs, refugees, or protesters. In this special issue, we seek to examine the meanings attributed to various youthful modes of being and becoming in violent conflict. How do ‘youths’ perceive being and becoming in such environments, and how do others perceive ‘youth’? Who has the authority to define ‘youth’ and (il)legitimate ‘youth’ participation in violent conflict? And how is this authority negotiated? Studying the making of youth and its underlying power relations in violent contexts also offers an interesting lens to reflect more broadly on violent conflict itself.

In sum, this special issue’s objective is to start a more nuanced conversation about ‘youth’ in contemporary violent conflict as part of a broader quest for social change. We welcome contributions from different disciplines – such as criminology, political science, anthropology, geography, and sociology – that deal with empirical case studies on the interplay

between youth and violent conflict across geographical and social locations and broadly relate to the following themes:

- The ways in which the social category of ‘youth’ is constructed in contexts of violent conflict.
- Modes of being and becoming (subject formation) of ‘youth’ in violent conflict.
- Youth agency, practices, imaginaries, and rationalities in violent conflict
- Social trajectories and life-histories of youth in violent conflict
- Discourses on, and of ‘youth’ in violent conflict
- ‘Youth’ as a lens to understand the workings of power and authority in violent conflict.

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The journal of ‘Crime, Law and Social Change’ is interested in publishing this special issue.