

BOOK REVIEW

“O TEMPO DA JUVENTUDE: EMPREGO, POLÍTICA E MUDANÇAS SOCIAIS EM ÁFRICA”

by Alcinda Honwana¹

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The Time of Youth is a book published in August 2012 in the United States by the Mozambican anthropologist Alcinda Honwana with the title – *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change and Politics in Africa*. In May 2013, its Portuguese version was published in Maputo. In this book, the author discusses the experiences of young Africans in *waithood*³ and analyzes the socioeconomic challenges that most of these young people (also at the global level) face in the contemporary world.

The book is a result of researches made in four African countries, namely: Mozambique, South Africa, Tunisia and Senegal, between 2008 and 2011. The book's object of analysis are the many experiences lived by the young (particularly Africans) about how they deal with problems (such as unemployment, marginalization, the lack of civil liberties and sustainable means of survival, as well as, social inequalities) generated by failures of neoliberal politics, bad governance and political crises in Africa (Honwana 2013, 3 and 218). According to Honwana (2013), most part of the research was made with young people in urban contexts and only occasionally in rural contexts.

Young people, the focus of the study, are from diverse social and economic origins. To make the research, Honwana (2013, 11-14) used

1 Honwana, Alcinda. 2013. O tempo da juventude: emprego, política e mudanças sociais em África. Maputo: Kapicua Livros e Multimídia Lda.

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3 This concept is defined and developed later.

different research instruments, such as interviews, focal groups, histories of lives focused on juvenile experiences. The author visited places frequented by the young, as juvenile centers, parks, clubs and coffee shops. To access the sociability networks of these young people and to facilitate her relationship with them, she had the support of her research assistants, who were also young. This, according to the author, took to a “more refined understanding of the ‘young culture’, especially in the approach of sensible themes” (Honwana 2013: 12) – such as intimacy and sexuality, for example.

Beyond the interviews made with young people, the research’s main subject, Honwana (2013) interviewed governmental employees, religious leaders, journalists and intellectuals interested in the theme of youth, because in her understanding “studying youth implies not only to look at the younger’s lives, in all its diversity, but also to comprehend the social, political, economic and cultural concerns of the adults” (Honwana 2013, 4). This theoretical-methodological option allowed her to “better understand the way how these societies see the youth and the place that it occupies in the economy, in the culture and in the society in general” (Honwana 2013, 12i).

The argument used by the author to justify this choice of looking to the young, without, however, losing sight of the adults is that both generations “are involved in complex processes of building and rebuilding, in making and remaking society” (Honwana 2013, 4). This perspective is clearly critical to the classical sociological approach of education defended by Émile Durkheim according to whom “to have education, it’s needed an adult generation in front of a younger generation and an action made by the first over the latter” (Durkheim 2010, 32).

The thesis defended by Alcinda Honwana (2013) in this book is that the notion of *waithood* is more adequate to describe and to comprehend the waiting condition or the interregnum between childhood and adulthood in which most young people live worldwide, and the Africans in particular. To the author “the young are forced to grow quickly, but at the same time, it is much more difficult for them to reach the social and economic autonomy” (Honwana 2013, 12). For this reason, the book centers in the social experiences of young Africans in *waithood* and explores the daily activities and survival strategies that they use to face the socioeconomic and political challenges in their countries.

Honwana (2013, 9) develops in her book five main arguments: 1) most young people, particularly Africans, live in *waithood*; 2) *waithood* is a social and economic inequality issue; 3) the experiences of the young from the global South are neuralgic to understand the youth in the contemporary world; 4) the *waithood* condition is creative and active, and young people in

this condition are not passive; 5) the condition of *waithood* is transformed as long as it provokes radical socioeconomic and political changes.

This is, therefore, a book that analyzes the youth in *waithood* and according to the author "it represents a prolonged adolescence or an involuntary delay in reaching the adulthood status, a period when young people can't find employment, take care of themselves and of their families" (Honwana 2013, 5). *Waithood* is to the author a kind of 'suspended age', a waiting age, a liminal space in which the research subjects (young people) "are not dependent children anymore, but also are not autonomous adults" (Honwana 2013: 31). It is a "penumbra zone in which young people might have reached the chronological age of adulthood, but still they are not socially recognized as such" (Honwana 2013, 21).

This condition of *waithood*, that tends to become the rule worldwide, especially in the African societies, derives from "the infrastructural and economic decline, the fragile health and educational systems, the high unemployment rates and the socioeconomic vulnerability that seriously weakens the social tissue" (Honwana 2013, 31).

Alcinda Honwana's interest for this particular condition of *waithood* in which most young Africans live, but also at a global level, comes up "when during researches, many young people expressed repeatedly this feeling of 'hanging' or 'cornered' (Sommers 2012) in a situation with few exits and no perspectives of future" (Honwana 2013, 5).

To Honwana (2013), *waithood* suggests the multifaceted character of young people's transition to adulthood and goes beyond employment, including other aspects of social life such as, for example, "the access to formation and learning opportunities, to marriage and to building a family, to the civic participation". However, the author adverts that the notion of *waithood* may allude to the idea of passive waiting from young people, but her researchers point to the contrary. This condition that most young Africans face does not only enclosure or immobilizes them leaving them without action, but allow them creativity to invent and to negotiate new forms of being and interacting with society (Honwana 2013, 6).

Alcinda Honwana show us in this book an innovative approach, against normative, interdisciplinary and intersectional. It is against normative in a way that, for the author, the theoretical model by life cycles studies and the classical studies of transition are not capable of "capturing the multiplicity of situations that the young people live and simplify excessively the diverse processes that affect their lives" (Honwana 2013, 35). It is interdisciplinary by crossing theoretical boundaries of different disciplines, as Social Psychology, Sociology, and Anthropology. Lastly, it

is intersectional⁴ for taking into consideration and putting into relation gender, class, race, generation and nation variables.”

One of the main contributions that this book offers by taking as object of analysis young Africans in *waithood* is the possibility of understanding the answers that these young people give to concrete problems faced in their daily lives and, furthermore, realize what it means to be young, but also an adult in the contemporary world (Honwana 2013, 37-39 and 221). By looking to young people in *waithood* as active social subjects, the book contributes equally to change the way they are seen in the world – as being passive.

The book is divided into eight chapters and an introduction. In the introduction, the author provides a general presentation of the book: the context that motivated its production, the contextualization of the research theme, the countries and the period of research making, the methods and the used techniques, the participants in the research, the aims of the study. In Chapter I, she approaches the concept of youth problematizing what she calls youth in *waithood* or in the prolonged waiting age, contextualizes the countries where the research was made, discusses and defines the concept of youth and presents a state of art about the studies of youth in Africa.

In Chapter II, the author debates around the key concept of her argumentation – *waithood* – reflects critically about the theories of transition and life cycle, defines the concept of *waithood*, problematizes the traditional concept of adulthood and the unimaginable future by part of the young people in *waithood*, as well as, the transitions to adulthood in the context of so called ‘developed societies’.

The aspirations of young people (education and stable employments) are debated in Chapter III. Subsequently, in Chapter IV, it is approached the subsistence strategies adopted by the young in their daily lives as an answer to the socioeconomic and political scenario in the countries of study. In Chapter V, Honwana approaches the intimacy and sexuality of young people in *waithood*, evidencing the social transformations in the (re)building of masculinity and femininity, as well as in the intimate relationships and marriage.

In Chapter VI, Alcinda Honwana approaches the theme of Participative Citizenship – analyzing the way as young people “understand the political and socioeconomic situation in which they live and their engagement in social, political and cultural processes that may create positive changes” (Honwana 2013, 141). In Chapter VII, the author discusses the social and political transformations resulted from the youth’s protagonist in

⁴ In the sense defined by Crenshaw (1994 apud Hirata 2014: 62), as a propose that takes into consideration the “multiple forms of identity”.

Africa, focusing on the central role that they performed in the first revolution of the XXI century that brought down the Tunisian dictatorship. Finally, in Chapter VIII she systematizes as closure the main ideas developed in the book arguing, therefore, that the condition of *waithood* is not only lived by young africans, but it is a worldwide phenomenon.

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