



Venue

Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient
Kirchweg 33
14129 Berlin

ZMO-Colloquium Winter Term 2017/2018

The Idea of Youth: Concepts, Practices and Life-worlds of a Global Category

Thursday, 26 October 2017, 5 pm

Youth Studies: State of the Art and Prospects for Studying Young People in the Global South

Lecture by **Douglas Blum** (Providence College)

It is widely recognized that globalization tends to result in hybridity, as cultural imports are selectively adapted for local usage. Nevertheless, there is considerable variation with regard to the specific ideas that are absorbed, modified, or rejected in any given locale. What accounts for these particular patterns of "glocalization"? We know relatively little about the social processes and mechanisms involved, which in turn may shed considerable light on the outcomes themselves. A helpful approach for addressing this issue involves examining how different individuals respond to flows of global culture. If they respond positively, are they then able to enact such ideas or practices in their own lives? What sorts of social interactions ensue, and how are they managed? Investigating these processes may allow us to explain how and why certain practices become widely disseminated, or, on the contrary, absorbed only within narrow groups.

Kazakhstan provides an excellent site for conducting such research, since it has fairly recently become deeply enmeshed in the process of globalization. This in turn has generated a great deal of cultural change, including the introduction of novel practices and accompanying justifications, often leading to sharply divergent social responses. In order to examine this process in detail, it is useful to consider the experiences of young people from Kazakhstan who go to live in the United States for a time, and then return home. How do young Kazakhs react to the cultural differences they encounter in America? What changes, if any, do they try to introduce back in Kazakhstan, and why (or why not)? What sorts of interactions occur along the way, and with what consequences? Exploring these questions on the basis of extensive fieldwork (including the use of ethnographic methods) offers crucial insights into the social complexities involved.

In particular, and in line with an important trend in the sociological literature, it is productive to draw from the works of Bourdieu as well as Critical Realism, two distinct theoretical orientations which have often been treated as incompatible. Synthesizing these approaches allows us to evaluate the role of overarching conditions, social interactions, and personal reflections, as well as to judge whether such explanations are competing or complementary. This in turn makes it possible to go beyond abstract philosophical generalizations, in order to engage fundamental questions regarding the role of structure versus agency.

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Douglas Blum is Professor of Political Science at Providence College. He has published on a variety of issues, ranging from the connections between ideology and foreign policy to problems of geopolitics and environmentalism in the Caspian Sea region. In recent years his research has centered on the connections between globalization and identity. His works include *National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State and Society in Post-Soviet Eurasia* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), and an edited volume entitled *Russia and Globalization: Identity, Security and Society in an Era of Change* (The Johns Hopkins University Press and Woodrow Wilson International Center, 2008). His most recent book is *The Social Process of Globalization: Return Migration and Cultural Change in Kazakhstan* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).