Youth Studies in Colombia: State of the Art

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Abstract
This study is based on the most recent state of the art report about Youth in Colombia; the article summarizes the process of construction of youth as a specialized field of knowledge in Colombia. It reviews the researches and studies carried out during a period of 20 years (1985–2003) in 18 Colombian cities. This state of the art is a model that aims at transcending the cataloguing and abstract-type synthesis of research studies, in order to consolidate a more profound analysis that will account for the thematic treatment and the underlying notions of young subjects. The project has been produced on the basis of the following questions: What knowledge of male and female Colombian youth has been produced? Who has produced it? How has it been produced and what kind of subject is being constructed? After 2003, there is a sustained production of bibliography concerning the main topics of the youth condition, with progressively qualified contributions. By contrast, the State since 2006 has practically abandoned the institutionality that had been created for designing and managing public policies on youth.

Keywords
youth, subject notions, diversity, youth research, Colombia.

Introduction
This article is written from a very exotic country, geographically located at the northern corner of South America, with a great cultural diversity, crossed by a lot of pathways from north to south, with the chain of mountains of the Andes all along and surrounded by two oceans. It is the route for the globalized market of narcotics and weapons and the scene of unsolved armed conflicts, a deaf backing for terrible violence and fears. This country has also a creative force that has not overcome the inherited and expired political structures in order to build a project of a nation. During the second half of the twentieth century, young people have been first line protagonists in the search for different forms of social life. And since the 1980s,
scholars have seen in young people a study object that is fundamental for the unstoppable future of this country. In this context, to analyze and disseminate the knowledge production on youth in a Latin American country as Colombia is a priority.

Is important to know that in this article a state of the art is a type of documentary research from which accumulated knowledge on a particular subject is recovered and analyzed. One state of the art regarding research on youth in Latin America (Pérez Islas, 2006) points out that the ‘First Report on Youth of Latin America’ (Rodríguez and Dabezies, 1991) was made at the request of the third Ibero-American Youth Conference. Since then, there has been an outstanding state-of-the-art tradition in Mexico, Uruguay, Chile and Colombia. In Colombia, ‘the first one refers to the production of studies undertaken in the city of Bogota, where the recent appearance of this tradition of studies is surprising (Perea, 2000); this document analyzes three aspects: elaborations regarding juvenile identities (the ways juvenile groups define themselves), the topics that are dealt with and, finally, the methodological and theoretical tendencies. With respect to the studies focused on specific topics, those referring to school, to politics, to cultural consumption and sexual work stand out.’

The Mexican Institute of Youth has produced research since the time of the student movement of 1968. Systematic work is gathered in ‘Young People: An evaluation of knowledge. Research on youth in Mexico 1986–1999 (Alducin & Pérez Islas, 2000)’. It is also worthwhile highlighting the National Youth Survey 2000, that inquires into values, attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and practices, among many other topics, and the most recent, ‘Young People in Mexico’ (Reguillo, 2010). Studies on youth have been produced in other countries of Latin America: the student’s movements in Chile and Argentina (Aguilera, 2009; Balardini, 2002); rural youth in Latin America (Kessler, 2006); public policies and human rights (Castro, 2008); legal frameworks for the prevention of violence (Rodríguez, 2006); youth policies in Brazil (OIT, CINTERFOR, 1996).

In Colombia, we have found studies on youth that are grounded on the cultural dimension since 1985 (Salazar, 1990). In the early 1990s, the object turns into the focus of academic and public attention; a pioneering work is ¿Qué significa tener 15 años en Bogotá? [What does it mean to be 15 years old in Bogota?] (Muñoz and Marín, 1993). Furthermore, the 1996 international seminar ‘What do we know about young people?’, undertook a state of the art on youth, where the results of the project ‘Culturas juveniles de Bogotá vistas desde la cultura rock’ [Juvenile Cultures in Bogota seen from Rock Culture] (Muñoz, 1997) became socialized. The memories of this project are collected in ‘Viviendo a toda. Jóvenes, territorios culturales y nuevas sensibilidades’ (Cubides et al., 1998). In addition to presenting a balance of the conceptual perspectives, the authors focus on three main topics: the city and juvenile cultures, new sensibilities and cultural consumption, education and mass-media cultures.

Subsequently, a boom of works was produced at different levels, which can be consulted in the National Information System on the Situation and Prospective of Childhood and Youth in Colombia (SIJU) created by the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare—ICBF—and the Colombia Joven Presidential Programme1.

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Statistical information (125 variables dealing with topics such as population tendencies, survival and promotion of healthy life, participation, education, development, employment and armed conflict, recreation and culture) and a state of the art on youth research since 1985 are found in the system. In Bogota, at the local level, there is also a state of the art 1990–2000 (Serrano, 2003b). As a result of the seminar ‘Information production and knowledge for the formulation and implementation of youth policies’, organized by the PhD programme in Social Sciences, Childhood and Youth at the University of Manizales—CINDE, the book ‘Construcción de Políticas de Juventud’ (Muñoz, 2004) was published, in which a broad balance of the situation on the topic is presented. A second state of the art in Colombia (2004), of national coverage, was carried out by the Universidad Central; an impressive apparatus was set up that entailed the structuring of research teams in six regions of the country and eighteen cities.’ (Pérez Islas, 2006). We may add that the most recent state of the art on ‘youth as an object of study’ was published by the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (Herrera, 2006).

The structure of this research project that condenses the National State of the Art has been produced on the basis of the following questions: What knowledge of male and female Colombian youth has been produced? Who has produced it? How has it been produced? What kind of subject is being constructed?

**States of the Art: A Case Study**

The ‘Colombia Joven’ Presidential Programme, the German Cooperation Agency (GTZ), and UNICEF Colombia have joined efforts to strengthen Colombian youth public policies developing, for example, a Youth Information System (SIJU). This is a model that aims at transcending the cataloguing and abstract-type synthesis of research studies, to consolidate a more profound analysis that will account for the thematic treatment and the underlying notions of young subjects.

The National State of the Art presents a panorama of the most relevant perspectives concerning the generation of specific knowledge about a social subject, on the basis of a significant sample in terms of national production and non-significant tendencies in statistical terms. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the sample was configured after identifying the bibliography available on the topic in each city, and a subsequent selection of documents according to the relevance and accuracy of previous work. The National State of the Art then considered studies about Colombian youth carried out in the last 20 years (1985–2003), taking a real base of 18 Colombian cities concentrating on the main bibliographical documentation centres. The project aimed at identifying accumulated qualitative knowledge on male and female youths from at least seven large Colombian regions. At first, the emphasis was on completed research reports that could be found and consulted. Then, the research team included summaries of several undergraduate theses. Nine general themes were defined to group the studies, each involving a wide range of related subtopics. The experience of two previous states of the art already completed on the topic (‘Youth. State of the Art, Bogotá, 1990–2000’ and ‘Characterization of the Youths in the City
of Medellin, Colombia, 1990–1997’) was also taken into account. The State of the Art is understood as an:

Analysis of knowledge constructed on a particular topic. Knowledge, rather than showing ‘juvenile reality’—as if it were a mirror image of it—constructs it through the things it emphasizes, the logics by which it narrates, the images it uses and the gaps it leaves. Accordingly, the volume of research production on a specific topic is no guarantee of greater or better comprehension of it, just as quantity does not ensure truthfulness. On the other hand, the way of arranging the socio-cultural phenomena symbolically is preferred. (Serrano, 2003b: 19)

A first approximation to the knowledge produced tried to identify tendencies, thus providing a quantitative perspective of the topic concentration and its behaviour over the course of time. Similarly, on the basis of the quantitative analysis it was possible to identify the most common approaches, as well as gaps and lack of studies about some of our main general themes. In addition, the question of how such knowledge is produced and how it is traced by different research methodologies is also analyzed.

Who does research on male and female Colombian youths? In four of the seven regions (Central, Antioquia, Southwest and the Coffee Growing Zone), the importance of academic entities in the production of specialized knowledge on youth is clearly evident. The university is thus the main source of research on the topic in various ways and in disciplines such as Human or Social Sciences, as well as Health Sciences as in the case of Nursing. Youth studies have traditionally been concentrated in academic programmes such as psychology, anthropology, sociology and education sciences, although the topic has recently begun to develop in other fields such as political science and economics. Undergraduate students are an important resource for the production of studies about youth. Although the initial study did not aim at considering their thesis projects, in some cities, it would not have been possible to conduct the thematic search without summarizing the said works. The research conducted by male and female university students are closely linked to their major fields, the contexts and practicum projects they undertake and to their peer groups. The university researchers also conduct youth studies that result in final documents that circulate published and unpublished; however, the question about youth does not always characterize a research theme or become specific graduate programmes. Governmental organizations were identified as the second producer of knowledge on youth, with cities such as Medellin and Bogota playing a leading role because of their tradition of research activity. The documents found in Cali and Ibague resulted from frequent alliances between such organizations and state entities whereas in Neiva, the association was between NGOs and academic institutions.

On the other hand, the state has played a very important role in all regions as it called for and co-financed some projects through the implementation of some policies and initiatives. These research actions usually articulate specific governmental entities with universities and with the NGO processes as well. It is worth noting that this classification of knowledge producers recognizes a certain complexity that takes place in the production of knowledge when related to the topics addressed.
For example, academic production and NGO aspects such as social and political participation and the generation of public policies coincide with the institutionalization of the youth topic from state entities. Moreover, the youth cultures/production and cultural consumption axis looks as if it had emerged from academic sectors that cleared away psychological, sociological and epidemiological perspectives that were quintessential in their approaches. In cities such as Medellin, juvenile violence started to become a research object parallel to the actions that were being implemented officially (García et al., 1995; Marquez et al., 1993; Marquez and Ospina, 1999; Maya and Torre, 2000; Salazar, 1998).

A first finding is that the youth research production grows consistently in all regions of the country since the 1990s. Antioquia, the Central and the Southwest regions are clear examples; while the growth in the remaining zones occurs in the middle and at the end of the decade. This does not mean that no research on youths had been previously conducted because, of course, there had been a certain amount of research, mainly in the Central region, with an emphasis on topics such as family, education and the body.

The ‘Body, Juvenile Cultures and Social and Political Participation’ were defined as priorities in most research studies, but the emergence of research in each region shows some particularities. The emergence of research topics on youth during the 1990s took place mainly in major cities such as Medellin, Bogota and Cali, where it was particularly related to themes such as coexistence and conflict, and especially to juvenile violence. Social concerns about the connection of youth with practices such as organized crime could explain this analytical focus. After a period of scarce research production, the topic re-appeared towards the decade of the 2000 through the country but with emphasis on gang wars, juvenile delinquency, and more recently, the armed conflict. In the country’s capital, social and political participation is the most common theme among all research studies, reflecting the relevance of the participation discourse as established in the new Political Constitution of 1991. In Medellin, the topic would be slightly secondary, but this does not imply that it has been less relevant as a social concern. In fact, it may have developed mainly in the field of intervention with youths rather than as a research topic. Another commonly addressed topic is the ‘body’ related with teenage sexuality among both male and female youths. It is important to highlight that research questions are the same in all regions, with an emphasis on the causes, consequences and risks related to sexual practices and in some cases, on gender differences.

The ‘Production, Consumption and Juvenile Cultures’ is an area of research that generally points to the question of juvenile identities within the framework of contemporary, global and local transformations. The findings show that the new social and economic conditions and the global policies are related with how young people emerge as subject with a singular world and with their own worldviews. It first appeared as a research theme in the Central region and spread to other regions later on.

The theme of ‘Social and Political Participation’, shows both continuity and important production, probably because youth is perceived as a participant subject; although late developments about the topic towards the late 1990s may be related to...
the appearance of the Youth Act. It is important to highlight that regional studies do not usually refer to a particular young subject, with singularities and traits reflecting the locality. Rather, regional studies are either aimed at describing youths according to more universal notions or they reflect a blurring of regional juvenile singularities within the framework of a society that is becoming increasingly de-territorialized and globalized.

**Constructs on Youth Subject and Research Diversity**

The referred State of the Art was not only the compilation and organization of a considerable number of works with reference to the topic of youth in this country, but also the analysis of the predominant notions that have emerged from such production about both male and female youths. The question of youth construction becomes pertinent in this reading of the country, since research studies, in addition to describing reality, configure it, creating meanings and facilitating the circulation of enunciations and denominations of young people in different social scenarios (official organizations, educational institutions, mass media, etc).

One single predominant notion, vulnerability, appears to define Colombian youth in the summarized texts. This trait is mentioned more than 170 times. It is particularly used for some groups and it is interpreted according to many types of risk factors and found to exert a significant influence on public policies (Rengifo, 1999; Romero et al., 2002; Ruiz, 1998b). In these studies youths are generally considered a high-risk population which requires special attention from different social institutions, because of problems such as teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (Montoya and Arbeláez, 2002; Rico de Alonso, 1986); violence, delinquency and insecurity in both urban and rural areas (Navarro, 1999; Noreña and Jaramillo, 2002); drug consumption and aggressiveness, among other things (Guevara and Peña, 1995; Ruiz, 1998a). That is why young individuals are often described as being at risk, vulnerable, potentially dangerous, ignorant and disarticulated from the economic, political and social life of the country (Muñoz, 1996).

Concerning the same notion of vulnerability or perhaps derived from it, the image of youths as dangerous subjects arose in the decade of the 1980s, due to their visible connection with the phenomena of violence (Barrios and Gutiérrez, 1997; Parra Sandoval, 1985; Velandia, 1996). In this period, social concern was focused on two elements: insurgency and drug dealing (Ferro et al., 1999; Rubio, 1996), which were often blamed for risking national and civil security, and mainly involved young people. Consequently, the presence of collective actors such as gangs, groups and neighbourhoods is clearly felt in the cities, and hit men began to cause great alarm in the public scenario and in the mass media (Salazar, 1998; Serrano, 2003a).

However, in the political arena, discourses of youth presented it as the future of the country and the hope for social transformation (García et al., 1995; Palacio, 2001). This image becomes stronger in the context of the call for the Constituent National Assembly in 1990, specifically with the so-called movement for the Seventh Ballot.

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fostered by the Constitution of 1991, which aimed at the inclusion of a multiplicity of social sectors in the political life of the country. Consequently, participation became a vehicle through which young people could have an impact not only on their own most immediate environment, but also on the destiny of their nation (Bendit, 2004; Sarmiento; 2004).

The young subject is also constructed on the basis of the search for identity, which, together with vulnerability, are the most recurrent aspects in the studies. A significant number of studies refer to the search for identity during adolescence, associating it with a transitional stage of uncertainty, a period of physical, social and emotional maturing; turbulent changes, instability, role ambiguity, rebelliousness, internal conflicts, crisis of independence, moments of transformation and personal affirmation, preparation, and personality strengthening (Parra Sondoval, 1985; Rico de Alonso, 1986; Ruiz and Luna, 1998; Rua et al., 2002).

The search for identity is also related to the sense of belonging to juvenile groups and collectivities (Salazar, 1998; Serrano, 1995). The studies assume that the subjects need to relate to their peers in order to find common characteristics and construct their own identity and personality. Consequently, the group constitutes a crucial life scenario for the youth’s life, because youths redefine, consolidate and develop themselves as individuals within heterogeneous identities that respond to different historically defined cultural identities (Amaya and Marín, 2001; Bonilla, 1999; Daza, 1992; Granados and Munive, 2001; Zacipa, 2002). In addition to the above-mentioned notions, other notions were identified in the research studies with emphasis on age and on the notion of a subject of rights, which simultaneously stimulates reflection on the category of youth (Diaz and Tobón, 2003; Muñoz, 1997).

The images of the young people and the most common conceptual categories on the topic are usually interdependent with reference to the discourses involved. Some of those notions of the young subject conceived youth as:

i. Incompleteness: lacking controls and limits, immature, in the process of constructing an identity (Barreto et al., 1995; Diaz and Restrepo, 1997).

ii. Transition: in transit between childhood and adulthood, without a definite social position, in a preparatory process (Arias and Ramirez, 1989; Guevara, 2002).

iii. Vulnerability: risk-bearing, susceptible to both individual and social damage.

iv. Danger: youths are prone to violence and/or delinquency (Carmona et al., 2001; Cubillos and Zuniga, 1991; Romero et al., 2002).

The reading of youth as subject-problem is predominant here and provides a perspective on how youth is viewed. Another reading of youth representations in clear contrast with the preceding one is that of a subject which is ‘Bearer of a specific culture’ (subculture, juvenile cultures, microcultures etc.). From this perspective, a stigmatization of the male and female youths’ expressions is frequently generated. However, there is also a perception of youth’s specific cultures, which makes possible to recognize them as creators of the culture of their epoch, and also as an alternative
with respect to the present forms of subjectivization (Galviz, 2001; Perea, 2001; Rincón, 1994; Serrano, 2000).

A third reading of the meanings of youth constructed from the research considers the subject as Actor/citizen (bearer of social transformation, motor of change, society protagonist etc). The destiny of the country weighs on this type of youth subjects and requires their contribution for the solution of structural problems of our socio-political organization that are deeply rooted in history. They are also subjects of rights, especially of the right of participation, which impels them to be actors in the public scenario and in the development and progress of their communities (Cordoba and Sanchez, 1993; Perea, 1993; Uribe, 1999).

Some analytical clues were provided during the development of this study in order to explain the heterogeneity of the subjects included within the youth as social category. Approaches that question the homogenizing character of many of the youth denominations appear in the documents (Herrera, 2004; Quintero, 2003). These approaches do not recognize the varied nature of the subjects and groups that may be structured around the concept of youth and therefore a critique has been developed in reference to perspectives that unify the subjects by means of a criterion that linearly orders the vital course or that presents youth as a transient stage that has been defined as a natural condition. This study identifies some categories, based on which, diversity (or rather the difference) is defined, so as to recognize, from the very beginning, that male and female youths do not form a homogeneous social group. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that this analytical perspective could consider other dimensions. The study about the State of the Art also aims to define specificities concerning ways of being young, with reference to: belonging to rural or urban spaces, the place youths occupy in the distribution of and their access to different capital cities, gender condition, ethnical/racial singularity, sexual orientation and disabilities.

An introduction about the importance of each of these categories, as well as about the main approaches applied in the documents reviewed is made here. As mentioned in the quantitative analysis, with reference to the tally of the documents, three categories of analysis stand out: urban/rural (34.8 per cent), social class (29.5 per cent), and gender (25.8 per cent), in comparison to another group of notions such as sexual orientation (6.2 per cent), ethnical/racial (2.8 per cent) and disabilities (0.8 per cent), which are barely mentioned. When reviewing the tendencies of presence and absence in the axes considered, it is appropriate to wonder about the effect on recognition of the diversity of the subjects and of juvenile experiences. Thus, certain subject notions correspond to denominations of diversity that are correlated to the emphasis on certain research topics.

If we take, for example, the subject of the notion of ‘vulnerability and social risk or social danger’, we can associate it to ‘social class’, ‘urban/rural’, ‘ethnic or racial order’, and then correlate these notions to denominations such as ‘low or popular class’, ‘marginality’, ‘rural youths’, ‘black aborigines’; we can eventually place emphasis on them like ‘juvenile violence’, ‘gangs’, ‘entry into armed groups’, and ‘displacement’. The questions multiply. What happens when recognition of diversity in the sexual orientation of youths becomes mentioned in a preponderant
way in studies about infant-juvenile sexual exploitation or when gender centres on the problem of adolescent pregnancies? We could widen this framework further, by asking the following questions: What public control devices have been implemented when events of expression about juvenile cultures are institutionalized? Are we facing some sort of trivialization of the worldviews of juvenile cultures or of the contradictions expressed regarding the social world? What is the incidence of the new type of young actor on social change within the framework of institutionalized participation?

Final Remarks

Recognizing the advance in knowledge and the basic tendencies of inquiry—both theoretical and methodological—on which scientific production on youth is based is fundamental in order to detect the gaps in and the needs for new knowledge, which deals with the changes of epoch affecting youth’s life-worlds. Between 2002 and 2010, Colombia has undergone a period marked by the government’s mandate of ‘democratic security’, another name that is aligned with ‘the war against terrorism’ (at any price, it is worth mentioning). Plan Colombia assumed that youngsters were part of the armed conflict and consequently, the youth and institutional policies that had been accomplished over a period of 15 years were dismounted.

In Latin America in general and Colombia in particular, the living conditions of youngsters have deteriorated to a great extent: the factors that affect them the most are poverty, unemployment (they double the national total) and violence (both domestic and social), as well as implicit policies seriously impacting their rights: ‘false positives’, curfew in several cities, harassment of students in public universities, and raids on cultural centres. Few have access to higher education and the majority take whatever work they can get. CEPAL has warned that the worldwide financial crisis will aggravate the factors that exacerbate juvenile violence, since youngsters live in great frustration of their expectations of social mobility. In the context of a fragmented and polarized world, in which youngsters are looked upon with fear and apprehension and which they, on the other hand, perceive as devoid of order and meaning, new objects of study are outlined: their apolitical nature, i.e., their disaffection with the concrete democracy they have known; social integration/disintegration, particularly that of the poor that live on the margins of political democracy and do not even consider citizenship; ‘savage’ politics, built outside the known limits; temporality seen as a critical factor, i.e., another perspective on the future defined from their experience as ‘social time’, made up of diversities and multiplicities, in which resistance and creation can fit.3

By adopting the key of reading that was proposed in the Introduction (‘The Magic Triangle’: Researchers, Social Actors and State Agencies), related to the State of the Art that was presented in this paper, it is absolutely clear that in Colombia, after 2003 there is a sustained production of bibliography concerning the main topics of the youth condition, with progressively qualified contributions. On the other hand, the student mobilizations with flags of the right to a public education, for free and
with quality, has been the muscle for revitalizing the construction of a ‘very new’ youth movement, strong and unified, that has moved the whole country. By contrast, the State has lowered the guard and since 2006, and has practically abandoned the institutionality that had been created for designing and managing public policies on youth. In accordance with several recent studies, we have to conclude that the bigger recurrent themes are: scarcity, disenchantment, violence and media consumption. And within these contexts of fear, guilt, non-affiliation and uncertainty, ‘youngsters prematurely become old-young or death-young’ (Perez Islas, quoted by Reguillo, 2010).

Notes

1. See http://www.colombiajoven.gov.co/sistema_informacion.htm
2. This call, made by several student groups from universities in Bogotá and other Colombian cities became the ‘Seventh Ballot’ movement, which in turn was the origin of the call to legal elections held on 9 December 1990, which elected the new reformist group which would write the new political Constitution for this country (Murillo & Sánchez, 1993).
3. The production of studies that trace research lines and novel outlooks on the field is noteworthy. Among many other aspects, we highlight the following: juvenile cybercultures (Muñoz, 2010; Urresti, 2008); new political practices (Revista Argentina de Sociología, 2008: 11); theories on youth (Pérez Islas, 2008); new identities (Valenzuela et al., 2007); the future in Modernity (García Canclini, 2006; Mayer, 2010; Saintout, 2009). In all of them, and in a countless number of gathered works, especially in magazines such as Nómadas (see Issue No. 32, 2010) and in the Latin American Journal of Social Sciences, Childhood and Youth (see monograph numbers dedicated to youth in 2009 and 2011). It is also evident when youngsters invent themselves out of their own solitude, with their ‘biographies trapped by contingencies’ and ‘artifices for escaping’ with which they manifest their ‘discontent’ with contemporary society.

Today we know that ‘the foreseeable future of most youngsters in a country is the inevitable future of the nation’ (Monsivais, 2005).

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