State and Ideology: 
Youth Public Policy in Ontario

by

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Abstract
As global youth unemployment and youth led social movements become increasingly widespread, states have begun to consider youth a policy concern. In this thesis, I ask how youth experience being a policy concern. Ontario is the site of analysis, where the provincial government has recently released numerous public policies that draw on contemporary trends in youth research. Through policy analysis and semi-structured interviews, I connect the experience of Ontario’s young people to the theoretical principles of the state's policy approach. I focus on the tension between the individual and the social: between the idea of youth as described in public policy, and the actual social conditions of the youth who participated in this program. The experiences of individual youth, whose lives are socially coordinated by state policy initiatives, are a window into understanding the consciousness and learning that arises for a generation brought up in economic instability and austerity.
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Dedication

To Mathilde,

For when you are a youth

hopefully we’ll do better.
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Chapter 1: Arriving at Youth and Crisis

Origins of the Research

When I began to think about my research at OISE, I had questions about how teaching, learning and education can foster critical consciousness. I came from a professional background in workshop facilitation, and hoped to strengthen the theoretical knowledge underpinning my practice. However, I did not know what I meant by 'critical', what I meant by 'consciousness', and how I might research these concepts.

Meanwhile, I had the fortune to join a research project on youth, community and activism. I began an analysis of the Ontario government's youth policy framework, Stepping Up (Ministry of Child and Youth Services [MCYS], 2013). Stepping Up is a provincial strategic framework that harmonizes the goals and approaches of youth programming across the province. In this research project, I gained a sense of the impact of public policy in organizing daily life. Yet I continued to ask, 'who are these youth? Can I see them? Can I talk to them?'

The following year, outside of OISE, I had a conversation with a long-time friend and I mentioned my research on Stepping Up. He immediately became interested, because he was participating in a leadership development program funded as a part of this policy framework. I realized I was talking to one of the youth I was looking for. His program was the case study to understand who are the youth in Ontario's youth policy.

After a successful solicitation of research participants with the aid of the organization's director, the research project was born. Alongside an in-depth policy analysis of the history of Ontario's youth policy framework, I interviewed ten participants
in a leadership development program funded through this framework. I began with the initial goal of understanding how public policy coordinates the experience of young people, and the lessons learned from this experience. However, my participants kept telling me about an equally important issue: how youth navigate the new economy. In this thesis, I focus on the relation between public policy and unstable employment, connected forces that affect the priorities of Ontario’s young people. I focus on the historical emergence of contemporary youth theorization, and juxtapose this history to the experience of being young in Ontario today. In so doing, I return to my original questions: what is critical, what is consciousness, and how do we learn in a social context. In my conclusion, I discuss the implications for adult education. I argue that the lessons learned by young people raised in economic instability will have profound implications for the next generation of adult learners.

**Problematic of the Research**

The problematic for this research is the crisis of youth in Ontario: how the state is responding to this crisis, and how individual youth experience crisis and the state in their daily life. By the crisis of youth, I refer to a social experience that is multi-layered, complex, contradictory, and geographically dispersed. The crisis of youth is the coagulation of public anxiety and state interventions in response to the changing reality of transitioning to adulthood, manifest in issues such as persistent youth unemployment, disengagement from formal politics, and participation in social movements. By ‘youth’, I refer to young adults outside of formal schooling, in their late teens and twenties; though
as I will argue, 'youth' is a contested political concept with embedded assumptions of risk and promise. While the crisis of youth is a transnational trend, I focus on youth unemployment in Ontario to understand how this crisis manifests in a specific context, and in conjunction with forces such as wealth inequality, social exclusion, civic engagement, and other relevant social and political trends.

My study consists of two complimentary entry points into understanding how youth experience social crisis and public policy. My first entry point is an analysis of the evolution of youth public policy in Ontario. I begin with 2008’s commissioned report on youth violence in Ontario, entitled *The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence*, and I move to the official state policy response to this report (MCYS, 2013, pp. 6): 2012’s youth development guidebook, *Stepping Stones*, and 2013’s youth policy framework, *Stepping Up*. I argue that there has been a demonstrable shift in the theoretical frameworks invoked in each policy from 2008 to 2013. This shift has implications for how the province will design, fund, and implement future youth programming. I take up dialectical historical materialism as a theoretical framework to demonstrate how the conceptual tools of *Stepping Up* separate youth from their social conditions. I call this separation an abstraction of the individual. This abstraction creates the rationale for youth programming that intervenes in the name of facilitating individual integration into market relations, which I call ideological state programming.

My second entry point into the crisis of youth is an analysis of how young people experience state ideology. I draw from in-depth qualitative interviews with ten participants from a leadership development program based on *Stepping Up*, and I articulate the common themes and contradictions of their experience. I focus on the
tension between the individual and the social: between the idea of youth as described in public policy, and the actual social conditions of the youth who participated in this program. I argue that these experiences of conflict and frustration are not accidental, but are socially coordinated through public policy. In other words, the ideological state programming facilitates the emergence of these tensions. I use the experience of participants as a window into understanding the contradiction between the experiential reality of young people and the abstract ideals of youth development theory and policy.

Focus of the Research

It is important to consider whom the concept of ‘youth’ refers to, in terms of theory, policy, and programming. The question is complicated when the history of youth research is examined, especially in relation to the changing material context of young people over time. An in-depth response to this question forms the focus of chapter three, but I briefly take up the question now to clarify the principal population of this study.

Theoretically, the definition of youth is contested in the literature. Youth is conceived as a transitory phase, somewhere between childhood and adulthood (Tilton, 2010). From this perspective, transitions to markers of adulthood, such as leaving home, completing education, and entering the labour force, become central theoretical questions (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007). Increasingly, young adults, age 18-29, are delaying these transitions. Jeffrey Arnett (2007, 2014) has explained these delayed transitions through his theory of emerging adulthood. According to Arnett, prolonged transitions reflect the emergence of a new life stage characterized by identity exploration and self-
focus, in between attachment to the institutions of childhood and the institutions of adulthood. However, Arnett has been accused of using psychological development to normalize a political-economic process (Cote & Bynner, 2008). With this critique in mind, some youth studies theorists focus less on the apparent choice of delayed transitions and more on the social and economic coercion behind these choices (Woodman & Wyn, 2013; Wyn & White, 2000).

States have struggled to keep up with these debates. Policy makers have been beholden to identify a well-defined populace with clear boundaries, and they typically do this by defining youth through an age range. Traditional youth policy has conceived of youth as ending with the receipt of legal rights at age 18. More contemporary policy makers have recognized the delayed life transitions that affect more and more of the young adult populace. In the case of Ontario, the focus of this study, government policy defines youth as approximately between the ages of 12-25 (MCYS, 2013, pp. 5). This definition is drawn from psychosocial theories about the evolution of behaviour throughout the aging process (MCYS, 2012b), with the caveat that context is an important consideration in understanding these behaviours (MCYS, 2013). How policy makers deal with the question of youth in context is a central problematic of this study.

These contested definitions have a direct impact on the population targeted through non-profit and state programming. The leadership development program in my study accepts applicants from ages 18-29. Applicants must be residents of Ontario and have a demonstrated or potential record of leadership and community service. The purpose of this leadership program is to recruit young leaders to receive a high investment in their skill development. Most participants in the research had at least one
university degree at the time of participation, and several self-identified as coming from privileged backgrounds. Participants do not represent the most marginalized populations of youth today, but rather what MacDonald (2011) has called 'the missing middle' of youth studies. I rationalize my focus on a more privileged subsection of Ontario youth to analyze how those who might have been previously considered secure from social crises are now being affected in greater numbers.

Overview of the Case: The Leadership Development Program

The program my research participants participated in was a leadership development experience funded through the province of Ontario as part of the state’s youth policy agenda. I have decided not to mention the name of the program for three principal reasons. The first is that I seek to protect the identity of the program staff and the program itself. They were extremely agreeable to accommodating this research, and I would not want them to undergo undue critique as a result of my research. The second, and related, reason is to keep focus on how people experience public policy. The goal of this research is not to evaluate programming. I do not analyze any of the curricular documents or particular details of the projects that participants worked on. Rather, I am analyzing how youth experience being conceptualized in public policy. Many of the themes and lessons that emerge from the interviews resonate with Ontario’s youth policy agenda, and these are the themes I have chosen for analysis. Questions of the quality of program delivery are irrelevant to my analysis. The third reason is that the program has its own internal system of participant evaluation, and has
learned from this evaluation since its inception. Any critique of the leadership
development program that might be gleaned from my analysis would already be dated,
as the program evolves from cohort to cohort.

Nonetheless, to help the reader understand the case study, it is helpful to give a
brief overview of the program. This leadership development program is an eight-month
full time commitment. Participants work out of a shared space in downtown Toronto and
are paid a living wage for their work. The stated purpose of the program is to develop
‘21st century skills’, work on challenges for partner organizations, develop and pursue
participants’ ideas, and build individual networks that can be leveraged for future
opportunities. This translated into a wide variety of daily activities, which can be roughly
distilled into three categories: community and group meetings; individual exploration of
projects; and engagement with external guest speakers and workshops. Regarding the
exploration of projects, participants could choose what they wanted to work on at their
discretion; as such, there were a wide variety of projects that began during the program.
Regarding the engagement with community guests, speakers came from a range of
backgrounds, with the result that daily life in the program featured a variety of content
and pedagogy:

It was really just a lot of rumination, like, kind of binge-eating of cool
opportunities of workshops and things, that had an arc, for sure, but it was
kind of like mixing your dessert with your pasta with your salad with your
soup, kind of like this smorgasbord, you had to be really, you had to have a
really good sense of your appetite if you know how to pick the right order and
balance of things [Marlo, excerpt from interview].

The program included a mid-point retreat, where the group underwent reflection on their
current status in the program, as well as a closing retreat. To choose participants, there
was also a selection retreat before the program, which 50 potential candidates attended and 25 were chosen to participate in the program.

While I do not mention the particular backgrounds of my research participants in order to protect confidentiality, it is worth briefly expanding on the profile of a participant that the program was looking for. Participants came from backgrounds of demonstrated leadership in private, public, and not-for-profit sectors. Participants came from a wide variety of educational, class, racial, ethnic, and gender backgrounds, from rural and urban hometowns across Ontario. The program seeks participants with leadership experience to the extent that this experience reveals their capacity for problem solving, empathy, and passion for change. The program is meant to be a chance to give these young people time and space to grow and reorient themselves to their futures. The program selected many participants who considered themselves to be at a turning point in their career paths:

I was...at a [turning point] in terms of like...do I want to continue down essentially the trajectory I had started to put myself down...or you know, I was also in a place of being like kind of jaded and burnt out from that kind of stuff, and I was also in a place of maybe I don't actually want anything to do with that stuff. [Wallace, excerpt from interview].

I didn’t start [the program] precisely knowing what I wanted out of it, in large part because they invited people at [turning points] to be their candidates, you know they said, if you’re trying to come into this next stage, or in between, if you’re re-imagining, if you’re digesting, if you’re trying to do this, then this is the place for you. [Marlo, excerpt from interview].

Participants are meant to work diligently on their own projects, as well as in the construction of the internal community, throughout their eight months in the program.

In the completion of this research, all participants were alumni of this program. Half
of my research participants had gone on to secure temporary or permanent employment since the program ended, while the other half were focusing on their own ventures. All participants have been given pseudonyms. Due to the personalized nature of the program, I have typically avoided referring to the specific details of participants’ projects, and in cases where I have done so, I have changed the details of the project to protect confidentiality. After seven interviews, I had a disproportionate over-representation of white males in the study, and I initiated snowball recruitment for women and/or people of colour. I interviewed ten participants: one woman of colour; two white women; three men of colour; and four white men.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. Transcripts were then analyzed for themes that emerged in relation to my analysis of *Stepping Up* and *Stepping Stones*. I found that Ontario’s youth theory and policy framework reappeared in participants’ experience, creating opportunities for individual growth, as well as collective tension and conflict. I explore the expression of these tensions in three distinct yet interrelated experiences: the tension between self-needs and community needs; the tension between individual development and social change; and the tension between the idea of being a ‘young leader’ and the reality of having to re-enter an unstable economy. To understand why these tensions continually emerged, and what these individual experiences can tell us about the social relations of youth in Ontario, I focus on a key argument that framed the research: the state’s production of youth policy is based on an abstraction of individual youth from their relationship to society.
Rationale for the Research

Many of the broader trends of the global youth crisis of unemployment have been documented in Toronto and Ontario, making Toronto an ideal site for analysis of the crisis of youth and the state's policy response. Provincially, unemployment rates have been stagnant and above the national average since 2008, and municipally, the city of Toronto holds the lowest youth employment rate at 43% (Geobey, 2013). Unemployment in Toronto is compounded by patterns of wealth polarization by neighbourhood (Hulchanski, 2010) and racialization in policing (Sweet, 2014), meaning that the crisis of youth is experienced differently according to social location. The state is aware of this crisis, releasing provincial and municipal policies that aim to prevent youth from social exclusion, re-integrate youth into social institutions, and strategize a common future for youth programming (Maguire et al., 2013; Mcmurtry & Curling, 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; MCYS, 2012a; 2012b; 2013). These policies will direct youth programming for the coming years, and draw on dominant themes in youth research to substantiate their claims.

What is clear is that young adults are a policy concern. What is not clear is how young adults experience being a policy concern. The post-2008 re-emergence of a chronically unstable economy has made full time employment for young people increasingly unattainable (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2013). Jennifer Silva (2012, 2014) has researched what young people learn from permanent employment insecurity. Silva argues that youth who have lacked social support in their transition to adulthood have interpreted their transition as an individual process of accomplishment, and have come to expect similar levels of ability from their peers.
Silva has focused on young adults who have experienced their transition to adulthood as the withdrawal of the state from providing social support. But the state has not withdrawn from intervening into the lives of the young; rather, the logic and objectives of these interventions has changed (Giroux, 2009). Alan Sears (2003) argues that the state has been integral in the restructuring of society towards a new ethos of 'leanness'. The lean society is one where vocationalism and market relations have replaced previous logics of liberal humanism as the guiding rationale for social programming. While Sears focuses on reform of the Ontario K-12 curriculum as his site of analysis, I take up the question of what type of learning occurs in the lean society beyond public schooling. My research explores the experience of contemporary youth who have participated in a state-funded leadership development program that claims to offer '21st century skills' in the new economy. By focusing on the experience of youth whose lives are socially coordinated by new state initiatives, I shed light on the consciousness and learning that arises for a generation raised in economic instability and austerity.

To this end, the questions that guided my research were: How does youth public policy affect the consciousness of young adults? What kinds of learnings emerge from the social coordination of young adults through public policy? How does public policy affect young Ontarian’s horizons of imagination? Often times, when I would describe my research, it was interpreted as policy or program evaluation. This is not the case. I do not propose conclusions on the efficacy of a certain policy framework or leadership program. Rather, I am concerned with how youth policy creates a learning environment,
and what is learned in that environment. As such, my conclusions relate less to policy
efficacy than they do to the social, political, and economic relations that support public
policy, and how ideology enacted through policy socially coordinates the lives of young
people. I show how an ideological notion of youth as abstracted from their social
context, taken as the epistemology for how to know youth in the lean society, leads to
youth programming that blurs the social origins of marginalization.

**Layout of this document**

Having outlined above the key concepts and methods that framed my analysis, I
begin this document by expanding on my own theoretical framework. I offer dialectical
historical materialism as a useful set of conceptual tools that allows us to see aspects of
Ontario's youth programming agenda that would otherwise remain hidden. I use this
theory to articulate my understanding of the different social, economic, and political
crises that youth are currently experiencing, as well as the ways in which the history of
mainstream youth theorization has inadequately accounted for these crises. I analyze
how the state of Ontario is drawing from contemporary trends in mainstream youth
theorization to create an ideological youth programming agenda based on abstracting
individual youth from their social context. I then discuss the ways young people
experience their own abstraction by the state, with a focus on the lessons learned from
their experience.

In chapter two, I lay out my theoretical framework for this research project:
Dialectical historical materialism. I begin by probing some of the different ways theorists
have tried to take a more ‘critical’ stance towards youth studies. I then outline my understanding of critical youth studies as expressed in dialectical historical materialism. I draw on the works of Allman (1999, 2001, 2007), Ollman (2003), Sayer (1987), Smith (1990, 2004, 2011), Bannerji (2011, 2015), Carpenter (2015), and other prominent Marxists and Marxist-Feminists who have taken up Marx’s epistemology in particular ways. I unpack certain key theoretical tools necessary to understanding youth policy and consciousness in Ontario, and I explain why these tools allow me to see and analyze contradictions that would not otherwise appear. I conclude with a theoretical consideration of the state in Marxist theory, as the actions and initiatives of the Ontario state are a central focus of my research.

In chapter three, I outline the material and conceptual context facing youth. I examine the broader claim that youth transitions are increasingly delayed and different, and I focus on youth unemployment, exploring how the world of work has changed dramatically in recent years. I also analyze how unemployment relates to other social crises, such as social movements, securitization and surveillance, and lost faith in political institutions, all of which combine to create a context of 'precarity' for more and more young people. I then take up the relevant literature on youth development to explore how this social context is theorized in contemporary research. The state of Ontario draws from theories of positive youth development (PYD) to legitimize its policy ensemble. I historicize the emergence of PYD as an approach to understanding youth, and I analyze how PYD carries implications of a programmatic agenda for how to intervene into the lives of young people. I pay special attention to how PYD has come
to inform the youth policy landscape. I conclude with a critical examination of the theoretical harmony between PYD and Arnett’s (2007, 2014) theory of emerging adulthood, and I examine the insufficiencies of these approaches in grasping the contradictory social crises facing youth.

In chapter four, I enter the first point of my problematic through a discourse analysis of youth public policy in Ontario. I map out evolving global youth policy trends, and then I focus on three policies of predominant relevance to Ontario: *The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence* (McMurtry & Curling, 2008a; 2008b; 2008c); *Stepping Stones* (MCYS, 2012b); and *Stepping Up* (MCYS, 2013). I look at the shift in thinking that occurred between these different policies, from locating youth marginalization in social conditions (McMurtry & Curling, 2008a; 2008b; 2008c), to locating it in individual development (MCYS, 2012b; 2013). I use dialectical historical materialism to understand this conceptual shift in focus from the social to the individual. I focus on the process of abstraction, whereby youth are separated from their social relations and understood through psychosocial approaches to human development by age.

In chapter five, I explore the implications of this policy evolution on the lives of participants in a state funded leadership development program. I ask how participants experience ideological state programming. I explore how this ideology emerged in different aspects of the participants’ experiences. I focus in on three distinct and recurring tensions: The tension between self-needs and community needs; the tension between individual development and social change; and the tension between the ideal of youth as boundless leaders and the reality of facing precarious employment beyond
the program. I relate the appearance of these three tensions to their origin in the
dialectical relationship between the individual and the social. I argue that by abstracting
the individual and obscuring the social, the state creates a programming agenda that
can only theorize individual integration and not social transformation.

I conclude with an analysis of the implications of learning from ideological state
programming for the next generation of adults. Intended or unintended, youth policy is
having an individualizing effect on young adults. Coming of age without stable
employment is a fragmented experience, with a need to learn adaptation and flexibility
in order to navigate the precarious economy. The case of Ontario reflects dominant
trends in youth theory and policy; the question remains as to how adult educators might
respond to these trends. I end with some considerations for policy makers and adult
educators who seek to foster criticality and resistance among the next generation of
adult learners.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Introduction

A central pillar of my argument is that current youth public policy inadequately conceptualizes the relationship between youth and society. This pillar depends on my own ability to conceptualize this relationship from a theoretically distinct and nuanced position. In this chapter, I review different scholarly approaches to theorizing the relationship between youth and society. I bring their approaches into comparison with my own theoretical framework, founded in dialectical historical materialism. I then re-examine a central force in my research: The state. I draw on Marx (1978) and Sears (2003) to articulate the current logic of the state in the development of social policy. I use a number of conceptual tools that will frame the focus of my study, namely: Abstraction, level of generality, consciousness, ideology, social relations, political emancipation, the lean state, and the ethos of the lean person. I conclude with a summation of the principal argument that this theoretical framework allows me to observe: Ontario youth public policy abstracts youth from their social context, creating an ideological approach to youth programming that privileges the individual and obscures the social.

Youth and society: A review of ‘critical’ approaches

What might a dialectical historical materialist approach to understanding youth and society look like? Numerous attempts have been made to theorize the relationship between structure and agency in the transition to adulthood. In this section, I unpack
what is broadly understood as the new reality of becoming an adult today: Structured individualization. I review three attempts to theorize the relation between structure and agency in youth transitions research: Opportunity structures (Roberts, 2009), institutional constellations (Lee, 2014), and social generations (Furlong, 2013; Woodman & Wyn, 2013). I conclude with an analysis of the sufficiency of these frameworks to my purpose, and then transition into an exposition of the principal theorists I draw on to define a Marxist approach to studying youth.

A common entry point into theorizing the new transition to adulthood is the concept of individualization (Beck, 1992). Individualization is the extent to which, as social norms of adulthood are increasingly de-legitimized, individuals are expected to create their own personal rationales for what constitutes adulthood. Cote and Bynner (2008) argue that the withdrawal of traditional social markers is what creates behaviours that appear to reflect new developmental stages in the life course. In other words, developing through a new 'stage' of life is the external appearance of the experience of transitioning to adulthood in a highly individualized society. The lack of social markers of adulthood, and the accompanying individualized transition to adulthood, means that any attempt to attribute these new transitions to psychosocial theories of development is a misattribution of causation.

However, individualization does not mean that social location no longer plays a role. The recognition of the impact of social conditions such as race, class, and gender has led to the renewed articulation of 'structured individualization' (Cote & Bynner, 2008; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Roberts et al., 1994). Under this line of thinking, the transition to adulthood is not only determined by the creation of individual markers in lieu of social
ones, but also the resources one has to achieve these markers. The more financial and
social resources at one's disposal, the easier it will be to mobilize these resources to
achieve one's goals. The possession of these resources influences the creation of
markers of adulthood: In other words, how someone defines being an adult, and how
someone achieves adulthood, vary according to social location (Silva, 2012).

Roberts (2009) argues that ‘opportunity structures theory’ is a way of
understanding how youth successfully transition through structured individualization.
Opportunity structures are formed through the interaction of individual and social forces,
such as family backgrounds and labour market trends. Opportunity structures produce
different routes to full employment for young people (pp. 355). Looking at patterns of
education inflation (pp. 358-360) and reduced upward mobility in working-class
employment (pp. 360-361), Roberts argues that structures of opportunity have not
weakened, but rather have rigidified according to relevant class and family
backgrounds. In effect, social stratification has widened as a result of changing
economic and social trends, and individual youth struggle to challenge trajectories
towards social stratification. The choices youth make are re-interpreted as rational
decisions in light of the diminishing chances to break out of existing opportunity
structures.

For Roberts, opportunities shift, and individuals respond rationally, attempting to
adapt to this shift; whatever novel behaviours emerge from this adaptation are what
create the appearance of increased choice, autonomy, and identity exploration. Yet
there are exceptions to the increasing numbers of youth who experience a delayed
transition. Lee (2014) seeks a theory that can explain the existence of both emerging adulthood, characterized by delayed transitions, as well as accelerated adulthood, where youth transition into traditional adult roles with little to no interim. While some individuals succeed in accelerated adulthood and others struggle through emerging adulthood, Lee (pp. 713) argues that youth who are able to take more time in their transition to adulthood generally accrue more life-long resources, earnings, and upward mobility. As such, Lee offers the ‘institutional constellation’ as a theory that can explain changing trends in transitions, as well as exceptions to these trends.

According to institutional theory, institutions are a set of humanly devised socializing forces that set out certain rules. These rules permit, require, and forbid certain types of behaviour (Lee, 2014, pp. 715). Lee uses the concept of institutional constellation to refer to the way in which different institutions hang together to impact the lived experience of an individual. An institutional constellation is the broader arrangement of socializing forces, such as employment, education and the state, as well as the extent to which an individual's resources line up with this arrangement. Lee theorizes that greater levels of individual resources and personal alignment to dominant social norms will produce a more beneficial individual constellation, which in turn yields the opportunity to experience emerging adulthood. In other words, youth are more likely to receive the institutional support necessary to delay the transition to adulthood if their personal backgrounds align with society's expectations. Lee's theory allows for a gradual process of stratification along lines of class, gender, and race, according to personal alignment with institutional arrangements, while the mediating factors in this
conceptual framework (such as the interactions between institutions) leave space for exceptions. Youth with personal backgrounds out of sync with institutional norms might not gain access to emerging adulthood, but are still able to leverage their experience of accelerated adulthood into long-term success.

Both Lee (2014) and Roberts (2009) conceive of the transition to adulthood as a process of integrating into long-term adult roles. However, youth studies theorists have also asked about the extent to which cohorts of youth can disrupt and transform these roles. Woodman and Wyn (2013) argue that the transition to adulthood is not an individual process characterized either by accessing opportunities or integrating into institutions, but rather is a social process of struggle to redefine what constitutes ‘adulthood’. They operationalize this argument through the notion of the 'social generation'.

The social generation is the idea that age cohorts can develop new subjectivities to become collective political actors, change historical conditions, and challenge dominant social norms (pp. 268). Each social generation contains a certain level of friction and difference between young people, according to social location and individual decisions. The social generation is an attempt to acknowledge the interlocking influence of agency and structure on youth behaviours. Youth are conceived not as individuals transitioning into the stable adult roles of advanced capitalist countries, but rather as members of a contested collective that forms new standards and expectations of what constitutes normal. Woodman and Wyn conclude by arguing that conceptualizing youth
as a social generation can help policy makers design policy based on the needs and desires of their generation.

All three of these theories grapple with the relationship between structure and agency: Between opportunity structures and individual behaviours; between institutional constellations and transitions to integration; or between individual transitions and collective generations. In other words, all have grappled with the relationship between youth and society. When this relation is theorized as the interaction of two separate entities, the question becomes: To what extent does one prevail over the other? I argue that concerns over whether structure determines agency (or vice versa) are misguided, as they are premised on structure and agency being discrete and separate concepts. A new set of questions emerges when we assume the historical relationship between structure and agency to constitute each. This leads us to ask how structure and agency are related within a certain history, and what is learned by youth in this history. This is the task of my research. In the next section, I lay out my theoretical principles for conceptualizing youth in Marxist terms through dialectical historical materialism.

**Dialectical Historical Materialism**

Dialectical historical materialism is a complex and contested philosophical approach to studying social phenomena. I identify myself in the tradition begun by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The German Ideology* (1990), and continued by scholars such as Dorothy Smith (1990; 2004; 2011), Derek Sayer (1987), Bertell Ollman (2003), Paula Allman (1999; 2001; 2007), Himani Bannerji (2011; 2015), and Sara Carpenter (2015). In brief, dialectical historical materialism is a method of abstracting social
phenomena that does not abstract them from their historical context; that understands these phenomena as internally related and constantly evolving; and that situates them in relation to the researcher. I will first explain these points, and then focus on three concepts central to my research: Consciousness, ideology, and social relations.

Abstraction is a cognitive process of understanding phenomena by considering it separately from everything else. As such, it is a necessary part of formulating a theory. However, abstractions through a dialectical historical materialist approach differ from traditional abstractions. Ollman (2003) argues that Marx’s abstractions were different from his contemporaries’ in a number of ways. The first is that Marx’s abstractions exist at a different “level of generality” (86). Levels of generality refer to the different extents to which certain abstractions are generalizable to multiple phenomena. Ollman offers five levels of generality relevant to our discussion: Level one, what is unique about a specific situation or individual; level two, what is specific to people in modern capitalism; level three, what is specific to people in capitalism since its inception; level four, what is specific to people since the advent of class societies based on the division of labour; and level five, what is common to the human condition of living together.

According to Ollman (2003), Marx criticized his contemporaries for abstracting only to levels one or five: Their abstractions were either specific to each individual, or common to the entire species. Economists would attribute patterns of human behaviour to the innate nature of being human, or to the specific qualities of each person, without consideration of whether these patterns were specific to the capitalist mode of production. Against this tendency, Marx’s abstractions were predominantly concerned
with levels two, three, and four; he sought to understand how people evolve within capitalist and class-based societies.

It is not hard to see the importance of levels of generality when formulating abstractions of youth. Much of mainstream youth research refers to youth at the fifth level of generality, seeking to understand youth according to what they have in common by virtue of being humans at a specific age. Such a formulation obliterates any historical context that might otherwise inform our understanding of youth. My research will seek to re-introduce this historical context by abstracting at the second, third, and fourth levels of generality. Situating youth in relation to contemporary capitalism will inform how our particular historical moment relates to the current crisis of youth. In addition, it will situate policy and programming within this historical context. This allows us to re-theorize youth public policy not as an inherently desirable ‘best practice’ of all states, but rather as a historically situated response to a phenomena of late capitalist development.

The second important contour of dialectical historical materialism is that each abstraction is understood as internally related to its opposite (Allman, 2001; Ollman, 2003). For Marx, phenomena and their abstractions in human consciousness did not exist in separate compartments. Rather, they were internally related; in other words, social phenomena could only be understood by virtue of its relation to its opposite. The paradigmatic example of this is the capital-labour relation. Marx did not understand capital and labour as two separate entities, which then entered into antagonistic relations. Rather, it is the relation between labour and capital that causes antagonism.
For Marx, the relation precedes the concept, and so any conceptualization must account for this relational view of social phenomena.

Again, there is immediate relevancy here to the emerging crisis of youth. In its material context, the crisis of youth is often discussed as a youth problem; youth are unable to find jobs, youth are increasingly incarcerated. While the threat to social cohesion is acknowledged, the remedy prescribed is typically programming and policy that integrates youth into existing political institutions. This is because youth are conceptualized as existing apart from their relations with these institutions. When youth and society are conceptualized as abstract entities that subsequently interact, the logic follows that youth must be moulded to fit into the existing society. Counteracting this trend, dialectical historical materialism allows us to understand the relationship between youth and society as the driving conceptual force behind how we understand youth. With this starting point, the question goes from: ‘How do we fit youth into existing social institutions?’ to ‘how do we transform existing social institutions to overcome perceptions of youth ‘as-risk’ or ‘at-risk’?’ To ask this question we must move beyond categorizing youth apart from society, and instead develop a deeper critique of social relations of class, race, and gender. Theorizing this relation creates opportunities for research to ask new questions about public policy and state-funded youth learning.

The third aspect of dialectical historical materialism relevant to my analysis is the situation of the researcher in relation to the object of study. Ollman (2003) conceives of this through the concept of “vantage point,” which refers to how “the same relation [can be] viewed from different sides, or the same process from its different moments” (99). In
Marx’s case, this meant that concepts, such as capital, labour, and the state, would take on different compositions and structures depending on whether they were viewed from the vantage point of production or circulation. Indeed, Marx famously shifts vantage points at the end of chapter 5 of *Capital*, leaving the “noisy sphere of circulation” to uncover the mechanisms of exploitation that drive production (Marx, 1998, 121).

Vantage points encompass both one’s personal standpoint as well as the broader social context within which one stands. However, this does not mean that all vantage points offer equally valid, yet ultimately incommensurable, truths. As Dorothy Smith (1990) argues, while it is of utmost importance to situate the researcher as always implicated in the task of research, this does not reduce research to advocating for the validity of one’s own personal position. Rather, the goal then becomes to understand how different vantage points are internally related to each other, and how the constellation of concepts that stem from multiple vantage points, while appearing chaotic and fragmented, actually fit together in a systematic way. The subjects of the study and the researcher exist in the same world, and so they maintain a dialectical, not dichotomous, relationship (Smith, 2004). Vantage point is a conceptual tool to think through the different standpoints that can emerge from a singular relation. In other words, the task becomes how to explain social phenomena such that the multiplicity of vantage points is explained as well.

The relevance of vantage point to my research cannot be understated. How does my position as a white male Canadian youth researcher impact my findings? What is the relation between my identity and my consciousness, and how does this relation
affect the quality and rigor of my studies? How does this identity carry forward into my interviews with fellow youth? In this case, vantage point is more than methodological reflexivity; it is also the necessary entry point into understanding the crisis of youth. Only by recognizing and acknowledging my own experience of this crisis can I better understand the experiences and modes of thinking that emerge from data analysis.

At this point I have sketched the broad themes underpinning dialectical historical materialism. I now wish to introduce three concepts that will be central to my research: Consciousness, ideology, and social relations. In dialectical historical materialism, consciousness is understood as conscious being (Allman, 2001; Marx, 1990), meaning that consciousness always refers to the consciousness of someone acting in the world at a given time. Marx considered it a uniquely human ability to conceive of the world in the mind before creating it in reality (Marx, 1998). However, this ability always exists in dialectical relation to an individual’s given position and action in the world; neither determines the other, as their relation is the constitutive force behind each. I am interested in understanding the relation between the public policy put forward in Ontario and the modes of consciousness that emerge in a learning program funded through these policies.

If consciousness is human conscious action in the world, ideology refers to a specific type of consciousness. Ideology is an approach to apprehending social relations that privileges one part of the relation while obscuring the other, resulting in the conceptualization of relations as categories (Allman, 1999). For example, instead of understanding labour and capital by looking at how they relate, ideological
consciousness looks only at labour or capital. Ideological consciousness then abstracts that part of the relation from its historical context and makes it into a category; the result are modes of consciousness that advocate for the elimination of one part of the labour-capital relation, as opposed to the elimination of the relation itself. Importantly, if we conceive of the world in a fragmented, partial way, it is not because of some form of false consciousness, but rather because this is how we actually experience the world (Allman, 2001; 2007). As such, all our consciousness is to some extent ideological. The role of research is to use the experience of ideological consciousness, expressed in categories, to understand the social relations that underpin this expression (Smith, 1990; 2004). I invoke dialectical historical materialism as a framework to ask: how are youth abstracted and ideologically conceptualized by the Ontario state?

Bannerji (2015) discusses what she calls the “epistemological grammar” of ideology (pp. 166): That is, the specific thought processes involved in obscuring a dialectical relation to create a conceptual category. The first step is to separate ideas from those who produced them, in the process removing the historical and social context of ideas: “An epistemological act of decontextualization leading to extrapolation of ideas from their original situation evacuates their socio-historical content or concrete materiality” (Bannerji, 2015, pp. 167). Following the belief that ideas exist outside of historical conditions, the next ideological step is to connect these ideas to each other, and to endow them with the agency to move history. The result is that human activity is explained by a “constellation of ideas” (pp. 167) and not by a history or social formation.
Marx sought to counter ideological consciousness by "disarticulat[ing] this constellation of ideas or code into its components through historicization and socialization" (Bannerji, 2015, pp. 167). I seek to follow this approach to research by disarticulating the constellation of ideas of youth. I do this by historicizing the different ways youth have been theorized, and socializing the relationship between youth and society through the notion of crisis. By examining the import of the most recent ideological constellation of youth ideas into youth public policy, I offer insight on how the state is producing a new set of ruling ideas, and how youth are experiencing these ideas in their daily life.

The final concept of relevance to my analysis is Dorothy Smith's (2004, 2011) notion of a social relation. According to Smith, social relations are the ontological ground for any social science inquiry. They are the "actual practices and activities through which people's lives are socially organized" (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, pp.30). Social relations are premised on four assumptions: "Individuals are there; they are in their bodies; they are active; and what they're doing is coordinated with the doings of others" (Smith, 2004, pp. 59). This coordination is not accidental, nor is it conceptualized as separate from the process of inquiry. Social relations, and their coordination and re-organization, is the historically evolved way in which people relate to one another. They are not to be found through the articulation of theory, but rather through the observation of the daily life of individuals; this was what Marx and Engels criticized of their contemporaries in *The German Ideology* (Smith, 2004, pp.54; 2011, pp.23-24). These relations extend beyond the consciousness and activities of any one individual, and
function as a kind of connective thread that runs across multiple social settings (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, pp. 30-31). The activities of individuals are taken as an entry point into understanding these relations: "The focus of research is never the individual, but the individual does not disappear; indeed, she or he is an essential presence. Her or his doings, however, are to be taken up relationally" (Smith, 2004, pp.59). The process of inquiry becomes the articulation of the relations that provide the history and logic for particular approaches to human cooperation.

The notion of social relations has important implications for how we understand consciousness: "Consciousness is always and only the consciousness of individuals; it is embedded in the actual activities of people, in their social relationships, and in the economic and technological level of development through which individuals subsist" (Smith, 2011, pp. 23). In other words, it is the relationship between consciousness and social relations that constitutes the problematic of inquiry. The contested historical evolution of social relations provides the soil from which consciousness grows, and these types of consciousness can in turn tell us about the quality and type of soil out of which they grew. Sayer (1987) identifies this as the dialectical relation between superstructure (consciousness) and base (social relations). Smith (2004) is quick to emphasize, "history and society exist only in people's activities and in the forms of 'cooperation' that have evolved among them" (pp. 54). Research de-naturalizes and problematizes the activities of daily life and the history of social relations from which these activities emerge. Daily activities act to reproduce and transform these relations. From this perspective, the only way to study history is to study the activities of
individuals: "The emphasis is on activities, practices; on what people do. Society and history have no other forms of existence" (Smith, 2011, pp. 24).

The concept of social relations leads us to new ways of theorizing and researching social differences, such as class, gender, race, etc. Difference is generated from the unique vantage points of individuals within a social formation: "The social, as the concerting of people's doings, builds on and generates divergence of perspective and interest" (Smith, 2004, pp. 61). These vantage points, rooted in social difference, function as a window for theorizing social relations. Marx theorized the social relations of capitalism from the distinct vantage points and social difference between bourgeoisie and proletariat (Smith, 2004, pp. 61-62). Theorizing social difference is an important aspect of understanding social relations, and in my analysis I analyze what the state’s theorization of social difference can tell us about the social relations of youth in Ontario.

Bannerji (2011) argues that it is impossible to understand a specific instance of oppression without situating it within the broader social relations of power: "If they are 'specific' issues, we have to realize that it is because they are 'specific' to a general, larger set of social, structural, and institutional relations" (pp. 43). Bannerji calls this "a more complex reading of the social, where every aspect or moment of it can be shown as reflecting others" (pp. 44). The daily human activities that emerge from a particular set of social relations might manifest a particular line of social difference, such as 'race', at a particular time. Yet the particular manifestation of a single line of social difference should be taken as the entry point for understanding the social formation as a whole.
Bannerji uses Marx's notion of the 'concrete' to clarify this reading of the social. The concrete, as "the concentration of many determinations" (Marx, cited in Bannerji, 2011, pp. 48), has a dual character: It is a theoretical point of arrival, as it is the result of abstracting from social relations to create knowledge; and it is an ontological point of departure, as it provides an entry point into understanding the social (pp. 48). The concrete is a "fluid, dynamic, meaningful formation created by living subjects in actual lived time and space, yet with particular discernible features that both implicate it in other social formations and render it specific" (pp. 49). The concrete emerges out of the social coordination of human activities and is the visible "clusters of social relations" (pp. 49) that links individual action to social organization. ‘Youth’ is not a stage, but a relationship to society. My research focuses on the social coordination of this relationship, through public policy, as well as the divergence of perspectives that emerge from this relationship, through individual interviews.

This theory of social difference has implications for the task of research as well. The goal of understanding the concrete social relations of youth is to learn from how the divergences of individual perspectives speak to a certain approach to social coordination. As Smith (2004) argues, "[the researcher] is concerned with learning from their experience and with tracing how their everyday lives and doings are caught up in social relations and organization concerting the doings of others" (pp. 61). Difference in perspective is vital to the research process: "Difference in perspective and experience are central to discovering how people are active in producing institutional forms of coordinating" (pp. 63). I seek to learn how Ontario youth experience the state's attempt
to coordinate their consciousness through public policy, and to do this I focus on the diverse perspectives and experiences from youth alumni of a state-funded leadership development program.

Smith's notion of social relations, and Smith and Bannerji's notion of social difference, provides the focus of my study. My goal is to understand the social relations of youth in Ontario. I enter into these relations from two sites of human activity: Youth public policy, and interviews with alumni from a youth leadership development program. These two sites of analysis are connected, and the goal of my research is to understand this connection. How does public policy coordinate the social relations of youth? What relations are abstracted through processes of ideology in public policy? How does the categorization of youth in public policy obscure certain social relations by privileging a certain conceptual system? And how do youth experience the obscuring of social relations? How do youth relate to this conceptual system? These are the questions that preoccupy a dialectical historical materialist inquiry into the social relations of consciousness, and the effect of ideological consciousness on the reproduction of these relations.

In the next chapter, I argue that ideological consciousness is readily apparent in state public policy. Part of my claim is based on an empirical analysis of how the state abstracts youth from daily life. However, there is also an argument that this ideological abstraction is inherent to the liberal democratic state. I now turn to Marx's On the Jewish Question (1978) to understand why ideological approaches to abstracting youth from their social context are suited to this form of governance. Following this theoretical
analysis, I then turn to Sears’ (2003) theory of the ‘lean state’ to understand the state in contemporary Ontario. I explore how PYD fits within a mode of abstraction suited to the liberal democratic state more broadly as well as how PYD is promulgated through the contemporary ethos of ‘leaness’ today.

The State

A key part of my argument is that the state has a particular approach to knowing its subjects, in this case youth. I argue that this approach is not accidental. The state renders subjects governable through an epistemology based on abstraction, to impose a kind of uniform legibility (Scott, 1998). I first draw on Marx (1978) to explore the state’s epistemology for knowing its subjects, which Marx calls ‘political emancipation’. I focus on why political emancipation is inherent to the nature of the liberal democratic state. While the focus of Marx’s analysis is how the state takes up religious difference, I would argue that his analysis is relevant to any area of social difference, such as race, gender, or perhaps most important to my analysis, age and youth. After reviewing Marx’s theorization of political emancipation, I take up Sears (2003) to nuance the ways in which this theorization maps onto contemporary capitalist Ontario.

In On the Jewish Question, Marx addresses the extent to which the state can be said to emancipate its subjects. Marx writes in response to his contemporary, Bruno Bauer, who argued that the political abolition of religion was necessary to guarantee individual emancipation from different religions. But Marx argues that we must probe not only who is being emancipated, but what kind of emancipation they are receiving: “It
was by no means sufficient to ask: Who should emancipate? Who should be emancipated? The critic should ask a third question: *What kind of emancipation is involved?*” (Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, pp. 29-30). Answering this question forms the heart of Marx’s problematic; how does the liberal democratic state emancipate its subjects? And to what extent does this political approach to emancipation succeed in abolishing unequal social relations? Marx asks, “From the standpoint of *political* emancipation can the Jew be required to abolish Judaism, or [humanity] be asked to abolish religion?” (pp.30). Similarly, we can argue that it is not enough that the state emancipates youth: We must ask what kind of emancipation takes place.

Marx reviews how the question of religious difference is taken up by different states, and finds that different states politically emancipate their subjects “in the mode which corresponds to its nature” (pp.32). The mode referred to is emancipation based on not privileging any one religion (or class, or age), instead acknowledging all equally. According to the state’s internal logic, this mode of emancipation follows the nature of the liberal democratic state, which founds itself on principles of equality. The state appears to its subjects purely as a state, not formally composed of particular religious biases. The state openly professes to exist in the interest of all subjects equally, regardless of their levels of social difference. By taking such a stance towards the citizenry, the state becomes the mediator of this approach to individual emancipation. Modern notions of equality, and the civic rights that come with membership in a nation-state, are part of this process of state-sanctioned political emancipation.
Looking at how this approach to emancipation has been enacted with regards to other forms of social difference, Marx considers political emancipation ultimately insufficient:

But the political suppression of private property not only does not abolish private property; it actually presupposes its existence. The state abolishes, after its fashion, the distinctions established by birth, social rank, education, occupation, when it decrees that birth, social rank, education, occupation are non-political distinctions; when it proclaims, without regard to these distinctions, that every member of society is an equal partner in popular sovereignty, and treats all the elements which compose the real life of the nation from the standpoint of the state. But the state, none the less, allows private property, education, occupation, to act after their own fashion, namely as private property, education, occupation, and to manifest their particular nature. Far from abolishing these effective differences, it only exists so far as they are presupposed; it is conscious of being a political state and it manifests its universality only in opposition to these elements (pp. 33).

Marx argues that the liberal democratic state is founded on a paradox: It requires particular social relations to first exist among its subjects, in order to define itself as universal in opposition to these relations. The state’s stance is to not actively intervene in changing these relations, but instead to define itself as separate from their existence. But by defining itself apart from particular social relations, the state creates a society where these relations continue to be reproduced. Any level of inequality or oppression that might be created as the result of a certain set of social relations falls outside the theoretical purview of the state. The limits of the state’s ability to emancipate its subjects are the limits of the state to actively intervene in the social relations of private life. This is the limit of political emancipation: “It is because you can be emancipated politically, - without renouncing Judaism completely and absolutely, that political emancipation itself is not human emancipation” (pp.40).
Marx theorizes the effect this mode of emancipation has on the individual subject. He argues that it creates a kind of dual consciousness:

Where the political state has attained to its full development, [humanity] leads, not only in thought, in consciousness, but in reality, in life, a double existence...[a person] lives in the political community, where [they] regard [themselves] as a communal being, and in civil society where [they] act simply as a private individual (pp. 34).

The political emancipation that accompanies the liberal democratic state is characterized by this contradiction. On the one hand, a person exists as an abstract citizen, with equal rights. On the other hand, the social relations of daily life remain highly unequal, and are divorced from the concern of the state and left to the operations of individuals. It follows that social relations become the “essence of differentiation” (pp.35) to the extent that they indicate a level of particular inequality that exists in contradiction to the universalized equality of the state.

Marx makes it clear that this is not merely an ideal distinction, but rather a lived experience of being simultaneously a universal liberal subject and a particular composition of social relations. As this dialectical contradiction is lived in daily life, Marx does not doubt that social relations will overpower any claim to ideal equal citizenship:

Feudal society was dissolved into its basic element, [human]; but into egoistic [human] who was its real foundation...recognized as such in the rights of man. But the liberty of egoistic [humanity], and the recognition of this liberty, is rather the recognition of the frenzied movement of the cultural and material elements which form the content of [humanity’s] life (pp. 45).

These ‘frenzied’ elements are the real substance of humanity’s daily life in liberal democracy. The state’s abstract approach to political emancipation means that the social and economic relations of capitalism are free to create a world of inequality. Our
understanding of freedom in liberal democracy is informed by this contradiction, as the political emancipation of the state only provides “the freedom to aspire to be a capitalist” (Carpenter, 2015, pp. 131).

The paradox is intensified when we consider the ways in which the freedom of liberal democracy is purported to be a common right, as it is “completely predicated on the separation of individuals within community” (Carpenter, 2015, pp. 133). The ‘individual’ that emerges within this conceptual approach to understanding freedom in liberal democracy is an individual who perceives the abstract political community of the state to be “external to the individual as a limitation of [their] original independence. The only bond between [people] is natural necessity, need, and private interest” (Marx, 1978, pp. 43). The state’s mode of abstraction has an effect on how individuals perceive their relationship to community and society. The state does not merely abstract away from social relations. It continues to reproduce them by theorizing an individualism that sees community as an abstract limitation on personal freedom. In other words, the role of the political community is to protect the freedom of the individual to “reproduce the social relations of capitalism” (Carpenter, 2015, pp.133). This point will re-emerge throughout my interview analysis, as research participants found there was recurring tension between their personal freedom and their participation in the program community.

In summary: Marx argues that the state abstracts people from their social relations by establishing them as equal citizens, and by so doing, the state presupposes
the existence of these relations. This means that people live in relation to the liberal
democratic state in a contradictory way. On the one hand, they are categorized as
abstract and equal members of a political community. This membership is mediated by
the state. On the other, they continue to face the inequalities of social relations, which
now lie beyond the state’s theoretical duty to emancipate its subjects. Importantly, the
social relations of daily life remain beyond the state’s theoretical purview in a partial and
contradictory way, as the state does intervene in these relations through affirmative
action, racial profiling, progressive taxation, etc. By establishing this dual existence, the
state creates an internal logic for providing equal opportunity in an unequal world, to
maintain an ideal realm of abstract political participation. The result is that social
relations continue to exert an overbearing force on daily political life, and will continue to
inhibit any possibility for full human emancipation.

Marx’s theorization of the liberal democratic state contains two directly relevant
points to my study of Ontario youth. The first is the mode of conceptualizing youth taken
up by the state through the framework of political emancipation. As will be examined in
detail, Ontario’s public policy framework is meant to provide political emancipation for
youth. In this process, the government takes up a particular approach to
conceptualizing youth. This theoretical approach to knowing youth aligns with the mode
of abstraction that follows the nature of the liberal democratic state. The state
constructs a theory of development that purports commonality across age cohort, and
then defines Ontario youth through this theory. In the process, the state abstracts youth
from their social relations into an ideal realm of universalized being. In the case of my
study, psychosocial developmental milestones associated with coming of age is the
purported universality of Ontario youth, constructed in contradiction to the unequal
social relations that characterizes the history of youth in Ontario. These social relations
remain untouched so long as youth research and policy does not challenge the
assumptions of adulthood that define what is meant by youth. In other words, "whilst we
are busy problematizing childhood, we forgot to problematize adulthood" (Sidorenko,
2013, pp. 59). By assuming this mode of abstraction, the state puts these relations
beyond its purview, and presupposes their continued influence in the lives of Ontario
youth.

The second way in which Marx’s analysis resonates with my study is the effect of
the state’s mode of abstraction on the consciousness and reality of the individual. As I
will explore in detail in chapter five, youth experience the contradiction between the idea
of youth as universalized by the state, and the particular histories of social relations that
inform their thinking. This contradiction is experienced in a number of different ways, but
the common theme is that there is a disjuncture between what youth are told about who
they are, and what they experience in daily life. This disjuncture can be explained by
looking at the mode of abstraction taken by the state in designing policy and
programming. The impression of youth as equal, universalized beings falls into
contradiction with the reality of particular circumstances, and this contradiction was a
recurring theme for my research participants.

Marx claimed that particular social relations would come to overpower any claims
to universality within a liberal democratic state. My research asks whether this claim
resonates with the experience of youth participants in a state-funded youth leadership
development program. Yet this theory of the state remains at a high level of abstraction,
and does not yet reflect the contextual specifics of the history of Ontario. I now turn to
Alan Sears’s *Retooling the Mind Factory* (2003) for a more concrete conceptualization
of the Ontario state in contemporary Canada.

Sears uses a framework of the 'lean state' to analyze the implications of
education reform in Ontario during the 1990's. He defines the lean state as: "An
emerging regime of social policy designed to further...the development of lean
production methods" (pp. 2). Importantly, the social policy of the lean state is directly
linked to the processes of production that characterize an advanced capitalist society;
even though the state seeks to abstract citizens apart from their social relations, the
state itself cannot be understood without an accompanying analysis of these relations.
Lean production, a new set of social relations in the workplace, is characterized by:
"Strategies to eliminate the waste in work processes by increasing flexibility, reducing
the core workforce to an absolute minimum by driving up productivity and contracting-
out significant chunks of work" (pp.2). Sears argues that this ethos of production in the
workplace has spread to all areas of society through re-engineered social policy.

The state has re-engineered social policy with two complementary goals in mind:
Creating a 'flexible' and 'efficient' labour market; and shutting out any alternative to
participating in this labour market. The increased flexibility of the working class is one
way to achieve this. The proliferation of part-time, temporary, and contract work is a way
of polarizing the working class to ensure that there is a readily available body of labour
able to adapt to the demands of lean production (pp.14). The state takes the lead on modeling this new labour pool through re-engineering its own workforce, over and against the struggles of public-sector unions. The state is also able to heavily reduce the benefits of social assistance and welfare to drive people onto the streets and into the flexible labour market (pp.14-15). Not only does the state seek to promote precarious employment through lean production, the state seeks to reduce any alternatives but to take any job under these circumstances.

There is also an important cultural shift associated with these new social policies, what Sears calls "the ethos of the lean person" (pp. 16). Lean production involves the internalization of a new set of values, based on eliminating waste and dependence in order to be more flexible and successful in the new economy. The lean ethos embraces risk, and does not dismay at the lack of social support. The relations of consumerism best meet this new ethos, as the lean person defines their individuality through market relations instead of social citizenship. Relations of consumption become the new model for engaging with the state. Citizenship is seen less as the fulfillment of civic obligations and more as the receipt of services, which are increasingly privatized or run on commercial models (pp. 18). This reduction in state service to foster an ethos of leanness comes alongside an increase in the punitive measures taken against those unable to adapt to lean social policy (pp. 18-19).

The lean state's new approach to social policy, and the lean ethos it has generated, has important impacts on social relations of difference, such as gender, race, and class. Sears argues that the influx of women into the labour force, without accompanying support for domestic labour, has stigmatized women as 'dependent'
when they do not succeed in adapting to the lean ethos (pp. 19). The crackdown on offenders in the lean state has clear racial dimensions, as tightened immigration controls and zero-tolerance approaches to schooling disproportionately affect people of color. But what is perhaps most relevant about Sears' analysis is the way in which it resonates with Marx's theorization of the limits of political emancipation. All of the reforms in Sears' lean state follow the fashion of Marx's liberal democratic state: They are based on abstracting humanity away from existing social relations, into the foundation of equal and individual egoism. In this case, the egoism of the citizen is defined explicitly in relation to the market, as opposed to membership in the political community. But the effect is the same: The state abstracts people out of their historical context, leaving individuals to interact in an environment characterized by unequal social relations. These relations go on to reproduce inequality, which remains beyond the focus of the abstract reforms of the lean state.

Sears goes on to argue that lean state social policy treats public education as a force to prepare people for the relations of the market. While Sears focuses on the Ontario curriculum as the site of preparation for the market relations of lean production, I ask how a leadership development program funded by the lean state prepares youth for the new market relations of precarious employment. Sears argues that learning and knowledge are increasingly rewarded to the extent that they demonstrate market value (pp. 21). My research participants undoubtedly felt the impending pressures of learning for the precarious economy through expectations that they demonstrate flexible skills and individual growth.
How does the state create these expectations? This is the focus of my analysis, where I review the history of youth public policy in Ontario. I use the theoretical framework of dialectical historical materialism to explore the state's ability to conceptualize the social relations of youth in public policy. I argue that, despite a recent and prominent report (McMurtry & Curling, 2008a; 2008b; 2008c) calling on the state to address these relations, the state of Ontario continues to abstract youth in the mode according to its nature (Marx, 1978). I call this mode of abstraction ideological to the extent that it fails to theorize social relations as internally related to individual youth. I look at how youth public policy ideologically conceptualizes youth, and how this conceptualization creates a programmatic agenda for what is and is not possible when intervening into the lives of youth. I conclude with an analysis of how this policy approach creates a lean ethos of an ideal youth. This ethos holds youth to extraordinary expectations in terms of individual flourishing amidst deteriorating social support.

**Conclusion**

In this section I have explored how we might start to think about a Marxist approach to youth studies. I have reviewed some of the previous conceptualizations of youth that take a more relational approach, and I have found merits and limits in each. These approaches have helped to situate my own stance in studying youth in crisis: Dialectical historical materialism. I draw on a distinct method of abstraction, characteristic of Marx, whereby phenomena are conceived as internally related opposites in constant struggle, abstracted to their contextual reality in advanced capitalism. Through this method of abstraction, I invoke the concepts of consciousness, ideology, and social relations to
understand the internal relation between youth and society today. I consider the state an integral force in coordinating these relations, and through Marx’s notion of political emancipations and Sears’s notion of the lean state, I offer an understanding of the liberal democratic state as it is relevant to contemporary Ontario. With these theoretical tools in mind, I now turn to the crisis of youth, to understand the broader social and political trends that are galvanizing state response to youth across the globe.
Chapter 3: The Crisis of Youth

The Material Crisis of Youth

In theorizing how public policy creates a learning environment for youth, we need a clear understanding of the impetus for youth policy. By impetus, I refer to the social issue that policy addresses. The impetus for many theoretical and policy developments in recent years is the crisis of youth (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2004). I begin this chapter by focusing on the material dimensions of this crisis in four sections: First, I explore the claim that transitions to adulthood look different today than they did thirty years ago; second, I focus on unemployment as a link between individual transitions and social trends; third, I introduce the notion of revolt to articulate the political dimensions of this new transition; and fourth, I unpack the concept of ‘precarious’ to encapsulate the new experience of being young in Ontario and across the globe. I then offer a review of the history and current trends in theorizing this material crisis, which is characterized by a lack of theoretical attention to the social origins of youth experience.

The Crisis of Youth Transitions

Theorists and policy makers across disciplines have come to a broad consensus that the transition to adulthood no longer looks the same as it did thirty years ago (Berzin, 2010; Clark, 2007; Lee, 2014) Specifically, youth transitions are more prolonged than before. Young adults up to age thirty, particularly in advanced capitalist countries such as Canada, are delaying numerous traditional markers of adulthood.
These include: Finishing school, obtaining full-time employment, leaving home, getting married and having children (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007; Clark, 2007). Researchers ask whether these widespread delayed transitions are good for society and for young people (Arnett, 2007). Some argue that these delayed transitions are a symptom of how economic instability and coercion affect greater number of young people (Cote & Bynner, 2008).

Take the family for example: The familiar image of a union of partners with children is far from assumed among younger generations. Research shows that young adults are increasingly delaying union formation (Arnett, 2004; Beaujot & Kerr, 2007; Jamison & Proulx, 2013). Statistics indicate that the median age for marriage has risen for both genders from 1971 to the 2000's (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007). Along with such delays, new types of relationships are becoming increasingly common (Turcotte & Belanger, 1997). Increasingly common types of union formation include cohabitation without marriage, staying over while maintaining separate residences, and communal living. These changing behaviours challenge heteronormative assumptions of adult family structures and force us to re-think the relevancy of traditional markers for coming of age.

There are contested explanations for why these approaches to union formation are increasingly common. Arnett (2004) considers this new body of research to reflect the identity exploration of young adults. Jamison and Proulx (2013) argue that these different types of relationships reflect a desire from young adults to redefine the traditional boundaries of relationships in their favour. Scholars have suggested that these redefinitions of union formation are not an arbitrary choice by young people, but
reflect a consequence of subordinating relationship goals to career goals (Ranta, Dietrich & Salmela-Aro, 2014). Such arguments are premised on a certain level of agency in the transition to adulthood. While few scholars ignore the fact that there are forces beyond an individual's control, there is ample literature arguing that choice is a causal force in becoming an adult.

Yet there is survey evidence indicating that young adults continue to place high value on long-term, stable relationships (Lapierre-Adamcyk, 1990). Determining the values of young adults through arguments of choice and agency is complicated when we introduce the counter-argument that delayed union formation reflects coerced adjustment to a sluggish economy (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007). Under this line of argument, cohabitation may begin as an economic necessity, and then turn into a long-term union; cohabitation only appears to result from identity exploration (Seltzer, 2004). Delayed union formation might be understood less as an act of individual choice and more as an acknowledgment of the complexity of maintaining a stable union with two professional careers (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007).

Other aspects of delayed transitions have received similar statistical and scholarly attention, and have revolved around a similar question of structure vs. agency. This is perhaps most obviously the case with youth unemployment, due to the pervasive challenges involved in securing full time employment today. In the next section, I will introduce some of the broad themes of the youth unemployment crisis: That is, the stagnating youth employment rate in advanced capitalist countries since 2008 (Geobey, 2013; ILO, 2013; Kolm, 2013). I argue that youth unemployment, and delayed
transitions to full-time employment, are not only individual questions of transitioning to adulthood; they also have an important political dimension.

**The Crisis of Youth Unemployment**

A major driver in public anxiety around the crisis of youth is the extremely high rate of youth unemployment since the 2008 financial crisis. Globally, youth are three to four times as likely to be unemployed as adults (ILO, 2013), and close to 90 million young people are unemployed, constituting approximately half of all unemployment (Youth Policy Press, 2014). In Canada, the youth unemployment rate is double the national unemployment rate, and one in four employed youth are in a job not requiring their level of education (Kolm, 2013). Statistics from Ontario and Toronto paint a bleaker picture: Ontario has the highest youth unemployment rate of any province in Canada, and Toronto has the lowest youth employment rate in the province, at 43% (Geobey, 2013).

While these numbers are disheartening on their own, they also point to increased concerns about 'idle youth', and associations with antisocial tendencies, delinquency, and crime (Atluri, 2013). The recent popularity of the policy term 'NEET' (not in education, employment, or training) is meant to capture and respond to these concerns. NEET youth have been a policy concern since the collapse of the UK labour market in the 1980's, but has recently been incorporated into policy planning by nation-states across the globe (Macguire et al., 2013). Typical policy responses to the 'problem' of NEET youth have focused on providing a relevant education to equip youth for a challenging job market (Yates, Harris, Sabates & Staff, 2011). The concept of NEET is
not without its critics, who say that the term NEET stigmatizes unemployment as an individual deficiency, and ignores the heterogeneity within the NEET subgroup (MacDonald, 2011; Woodman & Wyn, 2013). These criticisms mirror similar arguments against past categories of 'idle' youth (Atluri, 2013) or youth 'at-risk' (Portelli, Shields & Vibert, 2007).

Notwithstanding such criticisms, states are justifiably concerned about persistent youth unemployment and the increase of youth with NEET status, which has long-term effects on economic and social stability. Beyond the direct loss of income, persistent spells of unemployment have been shown to have a ‘wage scar’ on the lifetime earning abilities of individual youth (Gregg & Tominey, 2005). Persistent youth unemployment has been linked to decreased quality of jobs and inflated value of educational credentials, as more and more educated youth settle for jobs that do not require their level of education (Kahn, 2010; Mroz & Savage, 2006; Oreopoulous, Wachter & Heisz, 2012). These trends threaten the long-term economic stability of advanced capitalist countries, as decreased lifetime wages and working conditions are normalized for the next generation.

An increasingly popular proposal to addressing the youth unemployment crisis is through youth entrepreneurship (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2012; Jobs and Prosperity Council, 2012). In lieu of the expectation that there will be stable employment in the near future, youth entrepreneurship argues that youth can demonstrate the skills necessary to begin their own revenue-generating venture. Programs such as internships, co-op placements and apprenticeships are proliferating under this line of thinking (CivicAction, 2014; Ontario
Network of Entrepreneurs, 2013), and proponents of youth entrepreneurship argue that the development of entrepreneurship skills will grow the economy (Jobs and Prosperity Council, 2012).

However, critics argue that a policy focus on youth entrepreneurship has the effect of individualizing the responsibility for a collective problem. Kelly (2006) argues that the internalization of individual responsibility for collective problems has produced a new type of ideal subjectivity: The entrepreneurial self. The entrepreneurial self is constantly working to self-refine to be more in line with market values of productivity, efficiency, and profit. For Kelly, in the case of youth, the entrepreneurial self becomes the ideal against which youth who are unable to achieve this subjectivity are labeled 'at-risk'. The result is that more and more youth are stigmatized through an 'at-risk' discourse, as the ideal entrepreneurial self is difficult to attain for marginalized youth. In addition to these discursive criticisms, there are also substantial material barriers to the widespread proliferation of successful youth-led enterprises. Research on the economic viability of young entrepreneurs indicates that they face greater barriers to financing and revenue generation than most enterprises (Carrington, 2006).

These statistical trends of high unemployment and low success in entrepreneurship portray a new economy for youth to navigate. Arnett (2007) has theorized that the increased number of youth who take multiple, part-time employment positions reflects a kind of job 'sampling' that is indicative of a prolonged phase of identity exploration. Yet Silva (2012, 2014) has argued that if this is a new phase of identity exploration, it is experienced profoundly differently by youth according to social
markers of class, race and gender. Silva points us to the types of learning that happened to her research participants from coming of age amidst such instability:

At a time when individual solutions to collective structural problems is a requirement for survival, [working class youth] believe that adulthood means taking responsibility for one's own successes and failures...this bootstrap mentality...has a darker side: blaming those who can't make it on their own...[youth] make a virtue out of not asking for help, out of rejecting dependence and surviving completely on their own, mapping these traits onto their definitions of adulthood (2014, pp. 31).

The research participants in Silva’s study are predominantly racialized and/or working class youth. They have endured disproportionate challenges in securing stable employment as a result of their social location, but they have learned to regard social location as irrelevant in securing success. Instead, her participants have internalized an expectation that individuals ought to navigate challenging social environments on their own. In other words, while class, race, and gender continue to reproduce inequality, individuals are learning to dismiss the relevancy of these differences. These young adults instead consider success to be a product of individual merit. The debate as to whether or not patterns of unstable employment reflect a new phase of identity exploration is secondary to the question of what individuals are learning from these patterns.

Silva asks what are the personal and political consequences of a generation internalizing themes of self-sufficiency and individualism. In the process, she brings to light the different subjectivities that emerge from coming of age in a crisis of youth unemployment, and how these experiences are mediated by social differences such as class, race and gender. Silva's research provides a useful template for my own, as we
have a number of similar research questions and goals. We both focus on the subjective experience of an unstable economy. We also both introduce social context as a mediating factor in understand human experience: Silva focuses on learning through coming to independence as working class racialized youth, while I focus on learning through participation in the state's public policy approach to youth 'development'.

Equally important are the ways in which my research differs from Silva. Silva's youth are predominantly working class, who have been directly affected by economic austerity and the deteriorating social safety net. In other words, Silva's youth have experienced austerity as the withdrawal of the state from providing social support. However, this does not mean that the state has stopped intervening in the lives of youth. Rather, the state has reconfigured its approach to youth programming according to the logic of professional development for the lean state (Kelly, 2003; 2006; Sears, 2003). These interventions bring with them a whole new set of learnings, which are the focus of my analysis. But first, to better understand the state's stake in the youth unemployment crisis, I turn to the political dimensions of widespread delayed transitions to employment and adulthood.

The Crisis of Youth in Revolt

It almost goes without saying that widespread youth unemployment spills over into other aspects of the experience of being young. Yet while the implications of persistent unemployment on delayed life transitions form a contentious debate (Arnett, 2007; Beaujot & Kerr, 2007; Cote & Bynner, 2008), there is a distinct question of the political implications of these patterns. Specifically, the question is the extent to which
youth are able to retain faith in existing social institutions, arguably the greatest implication of the youth unemployment crisis (ILO, 2013). States have good reason to be concerned, as demographic research on the population makeup of nations indicates that large portions of unemployed young men in the populace precipitates social upheaval and revolution (Bloom, 2012; Weber, 2013). In this section, I explore some of the more recent research on youth political engagement amidst widespread unemployment. I unpack the extent to which states ought to be concerned with a rising sense of revolt accompanying youth unemployment globally (Youth Policy Press, 2014).

Recent years have seen a proliferation of social movements with high rates of youth involvement, such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the Toronto G20 protests, the Québec student strike, anti-austerity movements in Greece and the Chilean student strike. I am indebted to conversations with a fellow student and collaborator, Chloe Shantz-Hilkes, in learning that these political movements are set against a backdrop of declining youth participation in formal democracy. This decline is measured through young voter turnout, political party membership, and campaign volunteering among young people (Block, Larrivée, & Warner, 2011; DeBardeleben & Pammett, 2009; Mayrand, 2012; Putnam, 2000). Some scholars argue that the rise in political participation outside of formal democracy is directly linked to the decline in formal political participation (Kyranakis & Nurvala, 2013; Lima and Artiles, 2013; Sloam, 2013). As such, rather than asking why civic apathy among youth is on the rise, it is more fruitful to ask why young people have sought to redirect their political energies away from state-sanctioned forms of civic engagement (Fenton & Possian, 2015).
Various explanations have been offered. More mainstream commentators on questions of youth activism have considered it a self-indulgent expression of identity exploration at the expense of the health of a democracy (Wente, 2012). In other words, alienation from formal politics is just a phase. However, the impact of unequal distribution of individual and institutional opportunities for participation in civic life along lines of race, class and citizenship (Flanagan & Levine, 2010) gives us good reason to doubt the extent to which civic disengagement can be normalized as a ‘phase’. Juris and Pleyers (2009) argue, based on ethnographic fieldwork with young activists in global justice movements from 1999 to 2007, that these new forms of political action are not just a phase. Rather, youth activism is the creation of a culture of resistance among youth. Young activists seeking equality, justice, and democracy are increasingly participating in social movements with practices that they believe embody these values. The promotion of such practices was a central feature of the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement (Graeber, 2013).

There is evidence of the tangible impact of these rising youth-led social movements. In Canada, we can look to the recent case of the Québec student strike. The current average student debt for recent post-graduates in Canada is $28,000 (Kolm, 2013). It is no surprise that the Québec government’s 2012 decision to significantly increase tuition fees was met with widespread protest. The ensuing social movement expanded beyond university campuses and included urban and rural communities mobilizing in support of the student’s calls for accessible education. The protest received widespread media attention, lasted several months, and debatably
forced a change in government. While the long-term effects of the student strike remain to be seen, the extent to which youth will passively accept austerity measures is being called into question through non-formal political action.

States have rationale to be concerned, both about widespread and ongoing youth unemployment, as well as increasing visibility of youth in revolt. This rationale can be found in what many theorists consider the purpose of youth studies:

It is important to study youth, because the points where young people engage with the institutions that either promote social justice or entrench social division are significant points of referent for every society. Hence, the study of youth is important as an indicator of the real 'costs' and 'benefits' of the political and economic systems of each society (Wyn & White, 1997, pp. 6).

Youth unemployment trends might represent a 'canary in a coal mine' of economic changes that are coming for the broader population. If youth function as a window into trends towards non-formal political action as well, which challenge the legitimacy of traditional civic engagement, then states risk being de-legitimized as these trends expand to the broader populace.

State response to these social movements is contradictory: On the one hand, states are open in their desire to increase levels of formalized civic participation by youth (MCYS, 2013), and the democratically engaged youth is idealized as the model citizen (Kennelly, 2011). On the other hand, states invoke brutal repressions and police responses to these same political actions; in the case of Québec, the government passed a bill that limited the public space for protest, and required that protesters submit their planned route for approval from police (Shingler, 2012). I refer to these and other similar measures, aimed at the social control of the youth populace, as securitization.
Securitization by the state refers not only to the policing of borders, but also internal processes that legitimize the use of state force to create 'security'. This can range from the implementation of zero-tolerance approaches to school discipline, through the early involvement of youth in the criminal justice system, to the surveillance of young people in the name of preventing the expansion of extremist worldviews. Ample research demonstrates that state securitization initiatives have an unequal effect across lines of race and class (Giroux, 2003; Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Hoffman, 2014; Thomas, 2011). While the impacts of these state policies and programs are well documented, there is a comparative lack of interrogation of the social context of securitization, and how this context affects the learning of individual youth (with notable exceptions - see Gonzales, 2011). Furthermore, securitization of youth exists in contradiction to another prominent claim of states: The formal articulation of a vision of promise, potential, and flourishing to be found in the next generation (City of Toronto, 2014; MCYS, 2013; UNESCO, 2004). That the state responds to such concerns in contradictory ways, simultaneously promoting the ideal of youth engagement while enacting economic austerity and social securitization, is a contradiction to be explored in this research.

Delayed transitions to adulthood, high rates of youth unemployment, and increasingly visible social movement participation, all characterize the global crisis of youth. This crisis demands that we ask: What is the state's relationship to youth today? The focus of this research is the contradictory and problematic responses the state takes to the crisis of youth. I unpack these responses through an analysis of the relation between a state-coordinated social context and the consciousness of youth within that
context. I now turn to the concept of 'precarious' to encapsulate the above-described contradictory social context.

**Precarious Youth**

In this section I argue that 'precarity' and 'precarious youth' are useful concepts for understanding how young people navigate the new economy. I introduce this concept now as a benchmark for the upcoming section, wherein I review the history of youth conceptualization. Understanding how 'precarious' articulates a different history than some of the more mainstream conceptualizations of youth will help situate us in relation to my research.

In terms of employment, 'precarious' is used to describe the youth unemployment experience, frequently invoked without a concrete definition (e.g. MacDonald, 2011; Maguire et al., 2013; Mills, 2004; Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005). Tammy Schirle (2015) takes issue with this conceptual ambiguity. She argues that the most recent Canadian labour market data does not indicate a trend towards more precarious work. Instead, she argues that job retention rates have increased in the past 20 years, and that large portions of those who work in jobs we might consider 'precarious' do so out of choice.

I appreciate Schirle's concise definition of precarious employment as a starting point for our analysis: Employment in positions that are part-time, temporary or contract based, offering no benefits and insufficient wages to pay for benefits, and wages below the educational attainment of the employee. Asides from the part-time hours, all of these
criteria are met by the type of employment held by participants in my research during their time in the province's leadership development program. However, Schirle's analysis focuses on Canadian male and female adults only, and does not analyze youth employment statistics, nor account for lines of social difference such as race, class, immigrant status, etc. Given that competing research argues that precarious employment is becoming the norm for young adults today (Mills, 2004; Standing, 2011) and that these patterns persist into adulthood for racialized and immigrant adults in Canada (Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005), the issue of precarity demands that we dig deeper.

I am less interested in the statistics of youth who are precariously employed than I am in the social context created by public concerns about precarious employment. There is contentious debate over the extent to which the new patterns of behaviour among young people, including taking multiple short-term employment contracts, constitutes a new life stage of transition or a by-product of structural coercion (Arnett, 2007; Cote & Bynner, 2008). Bypassing such debates, I introduce precarious employment as a social and cultural context within which youth operate. Along this line of thinking, it can be acknowledged that not all youth have the same experience of transitioning to stable employment, and that many youth successfully obtain full time employment despite the sluggish economy. My emphasis is on the social aspect of precarious employment: Youth from various backgrounds have peers who are precariously employed, access to media that discusses precarious employment, and job opportunities that involve many of the terms of precarious employment. Under this line of thinking, precarious employment is a social context that is experienced differently by
different youth, yet becomes a part of the cultural fabric of being young today (Drayton, 2014; Mills, 2004).

The social context of precarity is compounded when it is expanded beyond solely the sphere of employment. Giroux (2009) argues that youth are being rendered precarious through the reconfiguring of various social institutions, such as education, criminal justice, news media, popular culture, and employment. He argues that without the traditional supports of the welfare state, youth are being put in a constant state of precarity: Access to stable employment is increasingly scarce; costs of higher education are increasingly prohibitive; and involvement in the criminal justice system is increasingly common. This new reality is normalized through media and government discourse that portrays youth as a constant threat to social order. Giroux paints a useful picture of how being young today means being precariously involved in social institutions. ‘Youth’ and ‘precarious’ are increasingly conflated in contemporary understandings of young people.

The material context for youth coming of age today is complex, fragmented and chaotic; it is only fitting that the theories generated in response to this context are equally contradictory. I now turn to some of the debates on how best to think about youth. I take a historical approach, contextualizing the various notions of youth alongside the implications these notions carry for how youth programming ought to be designed and deployed. I then examine how this contested history of youth conceptualization has come to inform the current understanding of youth as an older
demographic. I argue that there is a conceptual inadequacy of these approaches in that they do not sufficiently theorize the social.

**The Conceptual Crisis of Youth: A history**

Policy makers and youth researchers contest the proper way to define ‘youth’.

This is somewhat due to the relational nature of youth as a concept: “[Youth] is a flexible identity that can only be defined in relation to the opposing categories ‘child’ and ‘adult’ (Tilton, 2010). However, this only explains part of the problem. To better understand why ‘youth’ is such a contentious term, we must understand researchers’ social goals for the future of youth in society. How one defines youth affects, and is affected by, what one thinks ought to be done with youth. As Alan France argues,

Throughout modernity the youth question, or ‘what is to be done about young people’, has been dominated by adult anxieties over youth as a social problem. At the heart of this are concerns over social integration and youth delinquency...the ‘youth phase’ has therefore been the site of extensive state surveillance and intervention, and as such it is a major contributor in the social construction of what it means to be young (2008).

The shifting historical definition, or what France calls ‘social construction,’ of youth, is bound up with the prevailing notions of social integration and adulthood that policy makers seek to realize for young people. In other words, the envisioned future for youth, and their current identity as articulated in theory, exist in relation to one another. In this section, I will focus on how youth identity and directions are simultaneously realized through social programming and state policy. This will become clearer as we examine three historically prominent approaches to defining youth: Youth as risk; youth at risk;
and youth *at promise*. I have summarized these different approaches to conceiving of youth below, and I will go on to argue that all three of these definitions remove youth from their social, historical and material context; fix them in an abstract conceptual order; and then use this conceptual order to justify the rearrangement of the lives of actual youth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptualization</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Implications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth <em>as</em> risk</td>
<td>Youth are unstable, volatile and chaotic beings, prone to violence and unrest without reason. Youth are a risk to the safety and security of the social order.</td>
<td>Youth ought to be policed, monitored, controlled, disciplined, and surveiled until they have aged sufficiently to evolve out of this mode of being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth <em>at</em> risk</td>
<td>Youth are the most vulnerable to the negative aspects of society. By virtue of their age or social location, youth are at risk of falling into delinquency and crime. Youth are at risk of becoming a risk.</td>
<td>Youth ought to be protected until they develop the resiliency needed to avoid becoming a risk. They need extra support from adults to avoid delinquency and to integrate into society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth <em>at promise</em></td>
<td>Youth have everything they need to flourish and make positive change, and merely need to be given the environment to do so. The positive aspects of youth can be harnessed so that youth grow into future leaders.</td>
<td>Youth ought to be given the freedom to make mistakes and develop their strengths. Youth need positive reinforcements and support systems to actualize their full potential.</td>
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Perhaps the most prominent and historically frequent social construction of youth is youth *as* risk to the existing social polity. In these portrayals, youth appear as instigators of societal unrest, depicted in a state of violence or in the custody of enforcement officials (Kennelly, 2011). The message communicated to the public is that
youth are an unstable force in society, easily brought to revolt, and irrational in their demands for social change. For youth-as-risk, whether their demands are justified is not asked; and when it is admitted that youth might have a point, it is argued that they are addressing the issue in an irresponsible and short-sighted way (Wente, 2012). These characterizations of youth rarely account for the social, material, or historical context that might otherwise explain the current state of social unrest.

This mode of explanation is called ‘deficit thinking’, where only the most detrimental or negative aspects of youth are focused on. Deficit thinking is followed by calls for many of the instances of ‘zero tolerance’ and ‘get tough on crime’ policies and practices that have received widespread media attention (Kupchik, 2010; Nolan, 2011; Saltman & Gabbard, 2003; Tilton, 2010). The goal of these policies is to force youth into compliance with state and institutional policy through strict punishment, including criminal prosecution, for minor offenses. It is not hard to see the logic of this approach: If youth are by nature risky, destructive, and irrational, then they must be policed until they have aged sufficiently to shed these undesirable traits. Critics argue that zero tolerance in schools prematurely exposes youth to the criminal justice system and creates a poor learning environment with higher expulsion rates (Gonsoulin, Zablocki & Leone, 2012; Hoffman, 2014).

Within modes of thought based on deficit thinking, little consideration is given to the historical context underlying youth unrest. ‘Youth’ is homogenized as a single entity, obliterating the particular details of different groups of youth in the process. Proponents of ‘zero tolerance’ approaches to youth discipline believe it will invoke a uniform
standard of good behaviour, regardless of the different social and material contexts relevant to understanding that behaviour. The result is that these approaches to youth discipline fall disproportionately on youth of colour (Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Hoffman, 2014). Deficit thinking leaves no space to understand the relationship between youth of colour being disproportionately punished by zero tolerance, and the material inequality of people of colour in North America (Pateman & Mills, 2007). Attempts to theorize this relationship from a deficit-thinking framework have tended to argue that genetic or cultural differences are the source of inequality (e.g., Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Murray, 1984).

While historically prevalent, deficit thinking was criticized as indifferent towards the suffering of youth, and through these criticisms an alternative mode of conceptualizing youth emerged: Youth at risk. In this version, youth exist in a risky and endangered state, and thus are in need of care and development from adults in order to ensure they can eventually take their proper place in society. Theorists recognize that social conditions are not optimal, and that youth must navigate these conditions as best they can (Wyn & White, 2000). ‘Youth at risk’ seeks to protect youth during this journey, as opposed to punishing them further. One social approach to solving the problem of youth at risk is the imposition of a curfew for youth (White, 1996). Proponents of youth curfews argue that they are a necessary measure to save youth from the risks inherent to being young in society.

However, ‘youth at risk’ has been criticized as marginalizing those that are already marginalized. This is because ‘youth at risk’ has as its premise the idea that
youth are incomplete, unproductive, and in a generally undesirable state, and so adults are required to shelter youth until they are ready to enter society (Riele, 2006). This mode of thinking is a different kind of deficit discourse for youth. Critics claim ‘youth at risk’ thinking inherently pathologizes youth as in need of constant care and treatment, and patronizes them as unequipped to take care of themselves (Portelli, Shields & Vibert, 2007). When asking who are the ‘youth at risk’, this term emerges as a code word for poor youth of colour in urban areas. Yet it is equally important to ask what is at risk (Kelly, 2003; Turnbull & Spence, 2011). What may be at risk is not the fate of these youth themselves, but rather the stability of the social order and the normalcy of what we call adulthood, both of which are put in jeopardy by increasing numbers of youth in revolt (Kelly, 2006). From this perspective, risk analysis is a means for states to legitimize the social control and surveillance of young people. Under the logic of ‘preventing’ the potential emergence of latent risk, target populations for at-risk youth policy interventions can be expanded to include ‘at-risk’ children and families (France, 2008).

Many of the same premises that informed the ‘youth as risk’ mode of thinking can be found in the ‘youth at risk’ articulation. ‘Youth at risk’ is a conceptual category that is rendered static, de-historicized, and applicable to youth from a wide variety of social contexts. If ‘youth’ need to be protected, curfews are a way to protect them; no account is given to how different groups of youth (e.g. homeless youth, youth facing domestic abuse, etc.) will navigate the ‘protection’ afforded by a curfew. As such, ‘youth at risk’
and ‘youth as risk’ can co-exist as harmonious articulations of the social experience of being young today. Youth are not only ‘at risk’ of falling victim to the evils of society; they are ‘at risk’ of taking on the antisocial tendencies so heavily scrutinized in deficit thinking. They are not only protected from society; they are also protected from themselves. Amidst these conceptual relations, the question of who is actually being protected by programs for ’as-risk’ or ’at-risk’ youth is rarely answered.

Against these ideas of youth causing danger and youth at risk of danger (Tilton, 2010), a third mode of thinking about youth emerged: Youth at promise. Youth theorists developed ‘youth at promise’ thinking in response to dissatisfaction with negative media portrayals that cast youth as agents of chaos (Damon, 2004), without acknowledging the strengths youth can bring to their environments. Youth at promise is the idea that youth are already able to make their way in society, and they merely need the right blend of assets and resilience to properly flourish.

Youth at promise is heavily bound up with Positive Youth Development (PYD), the approach to youth development taken by the government of Ontario. The goal of PYD is to emphasize the strengths, interests, and talents that youth bring to their social context, and to build on these strengths through programming and community engagement (Shek, Sun & Merrick, 2012; Damon, 2004). Theorists use a framework of assets, either internal (e.g. academic motivation) or external (e.g. religious community), and consider the stockpiling of these assets integral to youth integration into society (Scales, 1999). PYD is thus fundamentally additive (Scales, Benson, Leffert & Blyth,
2010), and proponents of PYD claim that it is a relevant theory regardless of contexts of race, class or gender (Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011).

Theorists of PYD, who construct youth at promise, do not forget that youth encounter barriers to success, and advocate the heightening of resiliency alongside PYD. Resiliency is “the process of encountering and coping with the aftermath of negative experiences, resulting in positive developmental outcomes or avoidance of negative outcomes” (Brownlee et al., 2013). For a youth to be resilient, they must be able to face adversity in a way that aligns with prescribed positive developmental outcomes. Resiliency is thus an act of learning, and it is through the challenge to be resilient that youth develop the character traits that states and organizations are trying to bring about.

While lauded by governments and policy makers, ‘youth at promise’ and PYD is not without its critics. Many are sceptical that PYD is applicable across social locations, and argue that the ‘youth’ referred to in PYD is only grounded in white, middle class reality (Gardner & Toope, 2001; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). In addition, the youth of PYD is valorized and romanticized in this portrayal, while questions of how social context relate to individual behaviour are ignored. Some say PYD contains no analysis of power and merely reproduces the status quo (Portelli, Shields & Vibert, 2007). Finally, PYD fails to account for how different ‘assets’ and ‘deficits’ can affect youth differently, and thus ignores “how the presence of even one risk can have real and devastating impacts on youth” (Small & Memmo, 2004, pp. 7).
A prevailing criticism of deficit-based approaches to youth development was that they created "a shift of blame from structural defects…to the alleged disregard, faults and carelessness of the parties" (Valencia, 1997, pp. x). The exclusive focus on deficits that characterized traditional youth development theory was abandoned not only because it ignored the positive aspects of youth, but also because it ignored the structural conditions of youth behaviour, such as racialization, social determinants of health, and economic outlook. Critics claimed that deficit-based thinking only focused on the symptoms of a social problem as it manifested in youth behaviour, without considering or changing the problem itself. But even as PYD focuses on the positive aspects of youth, it is susceptible to the same critique. PYD does not offer an analysis of the structural conditions that give rise to assets and risks. Whether the focus is on how to prevent youth from failing, or how to build on youth’s strengths to succeed, both approaches ignore the question of why opportunities for failure or success are inequitably distributed in the first place.

Alongside these theoretical critiques, the evidence base for PYD and its theoretical tools, such as developmental assets and resiliency, is thin (Khanna, MacCormack, Kutsyuruba, McCart & Freeman, 2014). Much of the theoretical evidence for PYD is premised on studies that have either failed to be published in institutions or journals not already favourable to the theory (Stevens & Wilkerson, 2010), or have been shown to not apply equally to all types of youth programming (Jones, Dunn, Holt, Sullivan & Bloom, 2010), or have only validated parts of the PYD theory instead of the entire framework (Van Nuland, Taris, Boekaerts & Martens, 2012). Few studies (e.g.
Duke, Skay, Pettingell & Borowsky, 2008) examine how PYD approaches to youth programming and accruing more developmental assets during youth produces long-term advantages in adulthood. Theorists are forced to “speculate on what the distal outcomes of programs would be based on their proximal outcomes” (Khanna, MacCormack, Kutsyuruba, McCart & Freeman, 2014, pp. 100).

These issues around evidence are compounded when considering the social context of a PYD intervention. The vast majority of studies on PYD come from the United States, and those that come from Canada rarely take up the contested cultural and social history of Toronto, which is characterized by diverse patterns of social stratification along lines of class and ethnicity (Hulchanski, 2010; United Way Toronto, 2015). This context poses challenges for PYD programming: “[Toronto’s] demographic profile makes it virtually impossible to map evidence-based and promising interventions directly onto the youth who participate…especially as so few studies pay explicit attention to divergences related to gender, ability, socio-economic status, and ethnicity among others” (Khanna, MacCormack, Kutsyuruba, McCart & Freeman, 2014, pp. 101).

In the case of youth programming in Toronto, context poses a significant threat to the validity of PYD as a theory for directing youth programming. I will argue that scholars of PYD, and the policy makers who use PYD to craft a policy agenda, do not have the conceptual framework necessary to take this threat seriously. In PYD, youth are known via abstraction from their social context. Any re-introduction of contextual concerns can only nuance the mode of abstracting youth to intervene into their lives, but cannot fundamentally challenge it.
Ultimately, these three conceptual categories (youth as risk, youth at risk, and youth at promise) are not mutually exclusive. Youth can represent simultaneously the risk of social insecurity; at risk of falling into social insecurity; and at promise of flourishing despite social insecurity. This is because different contexts will evoke different portrayals of youth, and different responses to the crisis of youth. This is the paradox: Youth are abstracted from their historical context, and conceptualized in contradictory ways; to resolve these contradictions, the historical context is re-introduced and explained in reference to these concepts (Smith, 1990). The result is that youth exist as risk, at risk, and at promise, to the extent that youth can embody these three different concepts simultaneously in their social world.

The goal of my research is to explain the ideological harmony of this paradox with Ontario’s agenda for youth. But there is another conceptual ambiguity that has been introduced by the state in youth public policy: The question of age. The history of youth conceptualization detailed above stems predominantly from theorists concerned with high-school age youth. Yet Ontario's youth policy framework, with PYD at its core, is meant to be relevant to youth from ages 12-25 (MCYS, 2013, pp. 5). Moreover, I interviewed participants from a state-funded program that accepts applications for youth from ages 18-29. Even though the state explicitly draws on PYD, the definition of youth remains ambiguous. I now turn to current trends in youth studies to understand how PYD can be brought into alignment with another dominant paradigm for understanding older youth: Emerging adulthood.
Contemporary Definitions: Emerging-Adults-at-Promise

Since its initial articulation fifteen years ago (Arnett, 2000), emerging adulthood has gained theoretical influence on a variety of research into the lives of young adults in advanced capitalist societies. Arnett draws the rationale for his theory from the existing conceptual inadequacy of the life course in developmental psychology as articulated by Erikson (1950). Arnett argues that Erikson's theory of transitioning, first through adolescence during the teenage years, and then to young adulthood afterwards, was theoretically revolutionary fifty years ago but is now out-dated (Arnett, 2007). Given the dramatic social changes that have occurred since Erikson's time, Arnett argues that we now need a new phase to understand the experience of coming of age that is more nuanced than the transition straight from adolescence to adulthood. 'Emerging adulthood' is meant to fill this role by constituting a new phase of psychological development. It is important to note that Arnett's theory fits within a paradigm of developmental psychology in the same tradition as Erikson. Emerging adulthood segments life experience into overlapping categories of transition and growth.

The experience of emerging adulthood is characterized by five trends: Identity exploration, self-focus, instability, feeling in between, and investigating possibilities (Arnett, 2007). These trends manifest themselves in a number of patterns of behaviour, such as delaying union formation, switching jobs and careers, and frequent geographic migration and re-location. Arnett identifies the origins of this trend in the individualization of the life course; institutional constraints and social norms around what constitutes 'adulthood' have loosened, and individuals are increasingly left to define their own version of adulthood (Arnett, 2007; Beck, 1992). Emerging adulthood is a theoretical
articulation of the individual patterns of transition to adulthood. These patterns have emerged in response to a novel social context and a weakening social safety net.

Arnett (2007) argues that most emerging adults experience this new life phase positively, appreciating the time and liberation from social norms in order to explore possible futures and identities. Arnett is quick to add that his research deals predominantly with American college students, but he understands emerging adulthood as a series of chosen behaviours by young adults across contexts. Arnett (2007) argues that most people do eventually transition out of emerging adulthood, taking on adult responsibilities of marriage and employment by age 30. In other words, emerging adulthood is a 'phase' in the life development process.

Youth studies theorists have challenged this idea of a 'phase' (Cote & Bynner, 2008; Woodman & Wyn, 2013; Wyn, 2014; Wyn & White, 2000). Cote & Bynner (2008) argue that by focusing on emerging adulthood as a phase of development involving choice and exploration, Arnett misdirects attention from cause of this new phase: Changing social and economic conditions. They argue that a climate of economic austerity and social stratification of wealth has created a much more difficult transition to adulthood for young people. The behaviours that Arnett interprets as new life choices are coping mechanisms for navigating a precarious economy. Seemingly supported by the increasing normalization of precarious employment for youth, scholars argue that this tension between individual choice and structural constraint demands a more relational approach (Wyn, 2014) that can account for the change in social norms through generations (Woodman & Wyn, 2013).
It is important to consider the theoretical harmony between PYD and emerging adulthood, in order to better understand how the government of Ontario is using PYD in their programming for youth up to age thirty. Both PYD (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) and emerging adulthood (Cote & Bynner, 2008) have been criticized as universalizing the experience of white, middle-class youth, in the process ignoring questions of power and normalizing inequality. I argue that this is because both PYD and emerging adulthood are founded on the same epistemological assumptions: That youth can be known via abstraction from their social context.

Through this approach to knowing youth, the young people at question are conceptualized as having certain traits according to their age and psychosocial development. The various other aspects that compose their identity, such as class, race, and gender, which might impact the possession of these traits, are not considered. Removed from this context, PYD and emerging adulthood then identify patterns of behaviour that exist across one commonality. PYD and emerging adulthood theorists draw on developmental psychology to legitimize this way of knowing youth, and explain their behaviours through reference to these conceptual orders. Social context is reintroduced at the end, as something that is constituted through the new behaviours of individual youth making novel choices. In this way, statistics around precarious employment can be conceptualized as a consequence of the prolonged identity exploration of young adults. In other words, the social context of emerging adulthood is created by the choices of emerging adults.

Despite the prevalence of PYD and emerging adulthood in the literature, it is unconvincing to explain precarious employment and social crisis as a novel choice.
There is internal conceptual consistency between PYD and emerging adulthood to the extent that emerging adults can be conceptualized as internally containing the various aspects of flourishing promised by scholars of PYD. But emerging adulthood and PYD, or what I call emerging-adults-at-promise, is an inadequate explanation of the above-described social crises facing youth across the globe.

**Conclusion**

In this section I have gone beyond acknowledging that young people today are facing a different world than previous generations. While the crisis of youth is captured amidst public concerns that youth are living at home longer, not getting married, and failing to find full time work, I have argued that this crisis has a profoundly political dimension as well. Youth unemployment acts as a window into understanding a social context for youth that is characterized by precarity, austerity and securitization. Western states and policy-makers have a vested interest in containing and handling this crisis, as youth are de-legitimizing formal democracy in open defiance of state policy. How states theorize who is the ‘youth’ at question has profound impact on the approaches to policy development and implementation.

I have also reviewed three major epistemological trends for thinking about youth. I call these trends ‘as-risk’, ‘at-risk’, and ‘at-promise’, and I have focused on how the most recent definition of youth, ‘youth at-promise’, aligns with dominant ways of thinking about young adults today. I argue that all these theories take the same approach to conceiving of youth apart from their social conditions. In other words, while these
theories abstract different content in terms of how they define ‘youth’, some focusing on shortcomings and others on strengths, they all invoke the same ideological mode of abstraction: They cut young people off from their relationship to society. The result is an ideological understanding of youth; that is, the idea that youth can be known, and that youth programming can be designed, without an accompanying analysis of how youth relate to society. In the next chapter, I review how the state of Ontario has brought this ideology to a local context, and explore the implication of state ideology on youth programming.
Chapter 4: Ideology in Ontario’s Youth Public Policy

Introduction

Bowen (2009) argues that, "documents provide background information as well as historical insight...help[ing] researchers understand the historical roots of specific issues and...indicat[ing] the conditions that impinge upon the phenomena currently under investigation" (pp. 29-30). In this section, I treat Ontario’s youth public policy ensemble as a set of documents that help us understand the historical roots and the current conditions of the crisis of youth in Ontario. My work draws from, and is indebted to, conversations and collaborations with Professor Sara Carpenter, and fellow student Ahmed Ahmed, during my time as a Graduate Assistant with the Youth, Community, and Activism project.

I have two goals: To outline the broader approach to social programming taken by the state in relation to youth; and to articulate the ideological understanding of youth embedded in this approach. After outlining broader trends in global youth public policy, I focus on three principal documents that heavily influence programming for Ontario youth: The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence (Mcmurtry & Curling, 2008a; 2008b; 2008c); Stepping Stones (MCYS, 2012b); and Stepping Up (MCYS, 2013). I argue that these documents indicate both the historical roots and the current conditions that affect how youth programming is designed to facilitate certain types of learning. These historical roots are characterized by social relations of poverty and racialization, while the current conditions of state intervention into the lives of youth are characterized by abstraction from these social relations. The goal of this section is not data collection but
"data selection" (Bowen, 2009, pp. 31), to gain an understanding of how ideological processes of abstraction characterize Ontario youth policy and programming today.

**Youth Public Policy: Programming for Promise**

Public policy specifically for younger age cohorts is becoming increasingly popular among states across the globe. From 2013 to 2014, the number of countries with national youth policies rose from 99 to 122. Currently, 190 countries have a national government authority responsible for youth (Youth Policy Press, 2014). Numerous high-profile national and supra-national organizations have taken a vested interest in youth through policies or reports, such as UNESCO (2004), United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA, 2013), the ILO (2013), the OECD (2012; 2013), the United Way (Bonnell & Zizys, 2005; Jeffrey, 2008; United Way Toronto, 2008; 2012), United States Agency for International Development (USAID, 2012), and the International Monetary Fund (Bloom, 2012). The authors of these documents have increasingly been called on to view youth as competent and prepared to participate in society (Ferber, Gaines & Goodman, 2005; UNESCO, 2004), though some have instead seen youth as agents of revolt and revolution amidst global trends of economic inequality and austerity (Bloom, 2012). In the following section, I will outline the rationale for the prevalence of youth policies in recent years, as well as some of the frameworks these policies draw on to conceptualize youth.

In 2004, UNESCO released a report outlining the importance of youth policies for nation-states, and included several features that ought to feature in a national youth policy. They argue that given the recent prominence of social crises disproportionally
affecting young people, such as high unemployment and state upheaval, youth policies are an effective tool for states to address the effects of these crises (UNESCO, 2004, pp. 6). Youth are conceived as a distinct social category characterized by the unstable transition to a more stable adulthood (pp. 6). The goal of youth policy is to encourage the full participation of youth in actively influencing political institutions and agendas (pp. 6). Since this report, the importance of youth participation in civic life has only been re-emphasized amidst concerns that high rates of global youth unemployment precipitate lost faith in social institutions (ILO, 2013) and impending social upheaval (Bloom, 2012; Youth Policy Press, 2014).

What evidence exists that youth policy achieves increased engagement in political life from younger portions of the population? In 2008, Kamara Jeffrey and the United Way released a review of 'best practices' in youth public policy across Canada and internationally. They determined that a shared vision, and a common system of metrics for measuring outcomes, is integral to effective youth policy. A youth policy framework is one means by which to achieve a shared vision and common metrics (Jeffrey, 2008, pp. 9-10). A youth policy framework is an articulated set of values that cuts across sectors and seeks to align the efforts of youth programming around the achievement of certain outcomes, such as academic success, abstinence from 'antisocial' behaviour, and civic engagement. At the time of Jeffrey’s report, there did not exist a youth policy framework in Canada, and she considered the national youth policy landscape at best a "patchwork" that affected young people in contradictory and inefficient ways (pp. 18).
The new youth policy directions taken by the Ontario state seek to rectify this patchwork. It aligns the programmatic efforts of civil society with the theoretical principles of positive youth development. In policy, this takes numerous forms, such as: Setting developmental goals for youth; tracking data on strengths among youth; funding programs that focus on the strengths of young people; partnering with businesses and community groups; coordinating with other levels of government; and creating a youth advisory council for future policy development (Ferber, Gaines & Goodman, 2005; MCYS, 2013). Ontario also invokes a complex system of metrics in order to monitor the well being of youth in relation to these goals (MCYS, 2013), Ontario’s policy framework, Stepping Up, draws on an accompanying psychosocial developmental guide, Stepping Stones, for use by youth program practitioners. Stepping Stones articulates the behavioural strengths and needs of youth at different stages of the life course (MCYS, 2012b). All of these initiatives are meant to serve the broader objective of creating more and more assets for youth so that youth can flourish despite challenging social conditions (Ferber, Gaines & Goodman, 2005).

Yet Ontario’s youth policy framework, Stepping Up, differs noticeably from the report that recommended its creation. This report, titled The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence (McMurtry & Curling, 2008b), called on Ontario to repair a deteriorated social context for youth. The report’s authors, Roy McMurtry and Alvin Curling, considered this context to be characterized by inequality and discrimination across the province. Five years later, Ontario released a policy framework premised on theories that abstract youth from this social context, leaving questions of inequality and
discrimination unaddressed. I argue that this shift in focus has occurred as a result of a change in how youth are known. Specifically, I mean a change in privileging the individual and obscuring the social to know youth ideologically. To understand this epistemological shift, I begin with *The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence*, to show how youth can be known in a contextual way, and to provide a referent against which we can understand Ontario's public policy response.

**The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence: Contextualizing Youth Behaviour**

In 2005, in the wake of a shooting of a high school student at a Toronto school, the government of Ontario commissioned a report by Roy McMurtry and Alvin Curling to understand the historical conditions of violent behaviour among youth. Their goal was to determine how these conditions might be altered through government intervention. The ensuing report, *The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence* (henceforth *The Review*), sets out a framework for understanding and addressing this issue. In this section, I explore what I call the 'roots' theoretical framework that McMurtry and Curling use. I examine how this framework has been transformed into the developmental framework taken by the government of Ontario today (MCYS, 2012b, 2013).

The research question of *The Review* is twofold: To find out where youth violence is coming from, and to figure out how to address it "to make Ontario safer in the long term" (McMurtry & Curling, 2008b, pp. 1). To answer this question, McMurtry and Curling use five distinct methods: They listened to youth through community consultations with 143 youth across the province; they held neighbourhood insight sessions, where local youth arranged and facilitated consultations with 400 community
members in eight neighbourhoods; they researched existing youth violence prevention programming, both provincially as well as internationally; they held focused consultations with over 200 key organizations and informants; and they opened an online survey sent across the province that was completed by over 5,000 youth and adults (2008c, pp. 9-15). These methods share in common a qualitative and consultative approach. The context of these research participants becomes embedded in the data collection process. Diversity is not just acknowledged, but it is articulated as a key aspect of discovering what programs work for who, and why.

McMurtry & Curling take violent behaviour, and the mindsets associated with it, as the starting point for their research (2008b, pp. 5). They focus on risk factors to the extent that these factors lead us to the conditions that give rise to them. McMurtry & Curling articulate 5 visible risk factors: Alienation; lack of empathy; feeling of oppression and disadvantage; lack of voice; and hopelessness (pp. 5-6). At this point McMurtry & Curling make a key epistemological move: They treat these risk factors as symptoms of, and windows into, larger social problems. They spend the remainder of their report outlining the different social problems that produce greater chance of risk factors. This includes issues as diverse as poverty, racism, community design, education, employment, health and criminal justice (pp. 7-15).

The authors articulate a number of findings from their consultations with youth and communities across the province. Their report on community consultations (2008a) shows how their research participants would repeatedly link the violent behaviours of their communities' young people to the social conditions around them. Poverty, entrenched racism, inequitable education, and lack of economic opportunity were
repeatedly voiced as critical factors in creating a fertile ground for youth violence (pp. 10-19). McMurtry and Curling’s research participants were also quick to recognize that these issues were not the result of community assets and deficits, but rather part of broader trends relating to a lack of public support.

McMurtry and Curling also commissioned an accompanying report from the Grassroots Youth Collaborative (GYC) (McMurtry & Curling, 2008a, pp. 103-152). The purpose of the GYC report is for participants from a youth forum to voice their concerns, without adults acting as intermediaries. The authors of the GYC report, Alpha Abebe and Craig Fortier, took a similar qualitative approach to learning about the origins of youth violence. Abebe and Fortier rooted their recommendations in the voices of their research participants. Abebe and Fortier take a similar stance towards the root causes of youth violence, examining how broader trends of inequity in education, youth criminalization, lack of economic opportunity, and lack of access to public space, all create circumstances where youth violence is more likely (pp. 117-138).

Both Abebe and Fortier in their report, as well as McMurtry and Curling in The Review, make a number of recommendations that focus on the root origins of youth violent behaviour. All four authors are openly critical of policies that encourage zero tolerance in schools and tougher measures for young offenders, arguing that these policies produce more racial discrimination and violence than they prevent (2008a, pp.139-140, 142; 2008b, pp. 2, 38). All authors also make a number of recommendations that go beyond what we might typically identify as youth issues, such as raising the minimum wage, increasing funding for social housing, and implementing
anti-racism accountability measures for police and governments (2008a, pp. 145-147; 2008b, pp. 33, 36-37). Their recommendations are formed by the principle that changing social conditions leads to changing youth behaviour. Violent behaviours are preventable through a focus on improving the social conditions of those most prone to violence.

The theoretical tools of dialectical historical materialism help us understand how McMurtry & Curling justify their epistemology and know youth. They conceive of youth not as a category identified through age, but rather as a type of relationship to society. They take up a particular mode of abstraction that might resonate with Marx: Mcmurtry & Curling conceive of youth as internally related to the social relations of their current context, such as wealth inequality, lack of opportunity, and criminalization. They know youth by virtue of what is common to them as members of a marginalized group in a particular historical moment. They advocate for the historicization of youth consciousness and behaviours in a broken social context. Violent behaviours are a window for understanding how concrete processes of exploitation and racism operate in the lives of the young. History, power, and inequality form the heart of their conceptual framework, which they consider the 'roots' of what becomes visible to us, namely, violent behaviour among young people.

McMurtry & Curling's epistemology for knowing youth leads them to a number of key recommendations for youth programming. They focus on repairing the social context between poor, racialized communities and the police (pp.19-23). They recommend the collection of race-based statistics to inform whether programs are reconciling the history of racism in the province (pp. 20). They recommend particular focus on historically marginalized communities (pp. 25-28). The common thread of
these recommendations is that they go beyond giving all youth equal assets, advocating instead for state intervention into social relations of inequality. Such a stance entails placing social relations at the core of how youth are conceptualized, and is a stance obtained by knowing youth through their relationship to society and history.

Similar to past articulations of 'youth as risk', 'youth at risk', and 'youth at promise', how Mcmurtry and Curling conceptualize youth has implications for how to intervene into the lives of youth. In the case of The Review, youth are conceptualized through a 'roots' framework, and individual behaviours are interpreted as windows into social relations. From this theoretical standpoint, the social relations become the site for intervention. This link between theory and programming is crucial to understanding Ontario's agenda for youth. In the government’s ensuing policy response to The Review, social difference has been moved from the core to the periphery of the conceptual framework. This epistemological shift in thinking about youth is evident in both Stepping Stones (MCYS, 2012b), the province's interpretation of PYD as a theoretical framework, and Stepping Up (MCYS, 2013), the province's policy framework for operationalizing this theory.

**Stepping Stones: How the state knows youth**

In Stepping Stones (MCYS, 2012b), the province lays out their theoretical approach to conceptualizing youth through the lens of PYD. Stepping Stones is designed for people who work with youth, and provides a theoretical overview of youth development so that practitioners can understand the ‘stages’ of youth transitions (pp.
6). The province outlines their theory first by dividing development into four domains: Cognitive, emotional, social, and physical. These four domains form a circle that changes shape and size throughout the developmental process. The notion of a sense of self is at the heart of the developmental circle, while social context encircles the outer edge (pp. 16-17). The state argues that this model of youth development "outlines the progression of movement along developmental trajectories that are common for the majority of young people" (pp. 16).

The state concretizes PYD and this model through the notion of developmental maps, which are meant to serve as a guide for understanding the evolving behaviours of youth over time. These maps are based on different "stages" of development, rather than markers of age (MCYS, 2012b, pp. 30). However, the province argues that these stages tend to correspond to certain ages. The developmental maps are divided into certain age ranges: Early adolescence (ages 12-14), adolescence (ages 13-19), and early adulthood (ages 17-25). At each stage, there is a developmental map for the major cognitive, emotional, social, and physical changes that are theorized to be happening, as well as the behaviours that indicate these changes. There is an accompanying set of recommendations for how to support youth in these stages (pp. 32-61).

The predominant evidence base for explaining these developmental stages and their associated visible behaviours is based on cognitive and neurological science (pp. 18-19), and "leading edge research on youth development" (pp. 31).¹ The government also conducted consultations with youth and community partners across the province to

¹ In Stepping Stones, Ontario does not list or cite the research papers they drew on, hence why I have not cited or referred to this work directly.
nuance their understanding of PYD. However, this information does not factor into their
definition of stages of youth development, nor about how these stages are expressed in
behaviour. Rather, these consultations provide the evidence for how adults should
support youth through these developmental stages (pp. 31). The theoretical validity of
the stages themselves is not called into question as a result of community consultation.

How does this approach to PYD constitute an ideological mode of abstracting
youth? The concept of youth is conceived as simultaneously individually unique, and as
sharing characteristics common to humanity: "While every person is unique, the stages
of development between childhood and adulthood are consistent across populations
and generations" (pp. 5). The validity of the developmental maps of *Stepping Stones*
depends on abstracting youth to their common humanity by virtue of age. Many of the
claims about young people depend on this level of abstraction: "Young people...grapple
with their emerging identities" (pp. 18), "adolescents are...not as able as adults to
manage their emotions and their stress levels" (pp. 21), and "the internalization of
motivations continues to develop throughout adolescence as behaviour becomes more
self-regulated" (pp. 23). Only if youth are conceived as common by virtue of their age
and humanity can the province claim that these ideas of 'internalized motivation',
'emerging identities' and 'self-regulated behaviour' are relevant to populations across
the province.

In *Stepping Stones*, the concept of youth is also put forward as a category that
can be defined apart from its relations to adulthood and to social context. In the opening
pages of *Stepping Stones*, the authors articulate the changing social context of Ontario,
but they do so by conceptualizing this social context as an independent entity:
"Changing social and family dynamics and an evolving labour market mean that many youth need extra support and opportunities to learn the skills they need for success" (pp. 10). In this articulation, ‘changing dynamics’ and ‘labour markets’ are abstract entities that move of their own accord, independent of human action. As such, youth are expected to adapt to these abstractions and navigate the developmental maps of PYD: "Our youth will need to be resilient...flexible and adaptable for a changing world" (pp. 10). The state abstracts youth out of their relations with society, and considers how youth respond to adverse social relations as unrelated to the social relations themselves. The result is the knowledge that youth must be resilient, and must internalize motivations to succeed, in order to thrive regardless of social support.

This mode of abstraction creates an ideological theoretical framework for interpreting youth behaviour. This is most apparent in the province’s theories of cognitive and emotional development. Both these domains conceive of development as an individual process of maturation, and neither takes social relations into account. The province understands cognitive development to mean a series of changes in neurological functioning, characterized by behavioural changes such as increased “impulse control” (pp.19), “delay of gratification” (pp. 19), improved learning strategies (pp. 20), a more rational approach to knowledge (pp. 20), and an increased ability to assess risk and think logically (53). All of these processes are projected to begin in adolescence (age 12) and continue through to young adulthood (age 25). Yet nowhere in Stepping Stones are these concepts of cognitive development aligned with a particular context. As such, notions of ‘assessing risk’ and ‘controlling impulses’ lack
the specificity needed to account for how marginalized youth in conflict with the law might have different impulses to control and different risks to assess.

The recommendations for how to support youth in cognitive development also suffer from a lack of context: For example, adults are recommended to offer youth “opportunities for independence and leadership” and “freedom for youth to make mistakes” (pp. 52). Yet the inequitable distribution of leadership opportunities, and the different levels of support that privileged or marginalized youth receive when making mistakes, are not taken into account here. They are questions of equity and marginalization, reflecting social relations beyond the conceptualization of the state.

The focus on emotional development in *Stepping Stones* has a similar ideological foundation, but with a more nefarious consequence: By abstracting from social relations, the province’s theory of emotional development reproduces existing unequal social relations. In their theory of emotional development, Ontario re-articulates the same risk factors identified by McMurtry & Curling (2008b): Alienation; impulsivity; disadvantage; silence; and hopelessness. But where McMurtry & Curling consider these factors, such as impulsiveness, as a window into histories of poverty and racialization, the province considers impulsivity a result of incomplete emotional development (MCYS, 2012b, pp. 19). Many of the risk factors McMurtry & Curling identified, such as feelings of alienation, disadvantage, and silence (2008b, pp. 5-6), have been replaced with notions of “emotional self-regulation” (MCYS, 2012b, pp. 22), “cop[ing] and adapt[ing] to significant life stress or adversity” (pp. 23), “internalizations of motivation” (pp.23), and “acceptance” (pp. 22). Normalizing and adapting to the existing state of affairs becomes
the standard against which emotional development is measured. With this standard in mind, the goal of development becomes the successful reproduction of the status quo. Many of the province’s recommendations for supporting youth normalize adaptation to inequality as well. The province recommends adults support youth to control their emotions, motivate youth to face challenges, and reinforce strategies for behaviour regulation (pp. 54-55). Motivating youth to change the history of social relations in the province do not factor into these recommendations.

Amidst this theorization, context plays a peripheral role. The government acknowledges that social context affects how youth traverse these developmental stages (pp. 10, 16, 66). However, context is introduced after the theory has been developed, in order to understand how developmental models look different in different contexts: “Environmental differences also have an impact on development, affecting the supports, opportunities and experiences that youth have access to” (pp. 66). The ‘environmental difference’ the state of Ontario refers to here is different than the ‘roots of youth violence’ that McMurtry and Curling (2008b) articulated. Where the ‘roots’ were meant to be the site of intervention and change insofar as they explained violent behaviour, the ‘environmental difference’ is a peripheral force beyond state intervention. The province is able to acknowledge the existence of oppressive social relations, and even consider them fertile ground for undesirable youth behaviour. But the province is not able to theorize how these relations challenge their theory of development. The province can only abstract youth from this context and develop the individual. Yet with the social context of Ontario outlined by McMurtry and Curling (2008c) continuing to
deteriorate, we must ask to what extent the political emancipation of youth can provide “real, practical emancipation (Marx, 1978, pp.35); that is, emancipation from oppressive social relations.

   All this is not to deny that some forms of human evolution, growth and development may exist. Rather, I am arguing that in Ontario, ‘developing’ youth is not the problem. My purpose in this section has been to reveal what is seen and what is obscured when PYD is taken as a theory for knowing youth. Theoretical frameworks contain limits and create horizons of explanation. In this case, the theorists of Stepping Stones place social relations beyond theorization. I call this theorization ideological to the extent that it categorizes and de-historicizes youth, privileging one half of a dialectic while obscuring the other. In the next section I review the province’s policy framework for operationalizing this theory in youth programming. I explore how the state’s abstraction of youth from social relations impacts the creation of an ideological youth programming agenda.

   Stepping Up: The state's agenda for youth

   An ideological mode of abstraction reappears in Stepping Up, Ontario's policy framework for aligning the efforts, and defining the outcomes, of youth programming according to the theoretical principles of Stepping Stones: “Stepping Stones describes how youth develop…Stepping Up builds on this resource to identify the outcomes that matter most and how we can work together at all levels to ensure that young people thrive (MCYS, 2013, pp. 7). In the previous section I explored how the state constructs
an ideological knowledge base for rationalizing interventions into the lives of youth. In this section, I examine how these same concepts create a programmatic agenda designed to help youth self-manage the inequality of capitalist social relations (Carpenter, 2011), and to internalize the lean ethos associated with the normalization of precarious employment.

The goal of *Stepping Up* is to “help guide, focus and maximize our collaborative actions to support young people” (pp. 4). It is a policy framework for programming with young people, adults, community leaders, service providers, front-line workers and educators, government representative, and business people (pp. 107-108). While the government notes the importance of context (pp. 12-14), they intend *Stepping Up* to be used across the province in the support of all Ontario’s young people (pp.18). *Stepping Up* has a vision that “together, we will support all young people to become healthy, safe, hopeful, engaged, educated and contributing members of their communities and our province” (pp. 18).

To realize this vision, *Stepping Up* purports to cut across various sectors and organizations. It is based on seven principles for youth programming: An asset-based view of youth; targeted support; collaboration across sectors; engaging youth in programming; respecting diversity; making evidence-supported choices; and being transparent (pp. 19-20). These principles inform the seven themes and 20 outcomes that encapsulate the Ontario government’s approach to PYD. Ranging from health and wellness, through education and employment, to youth friendly communities, these themes are considered to be interlocking and part of a “holistic view of youth” (pp. 21).
The bulk of *Stepping Up* is the elaboration of the 20 different priority outcomes, for example, that “Ontario youth are physically healthy,” each of which fit into one of seven themes, for example, “health and wellness” (pp. 22). The Ministry argues that by focusing their programming on one or more of these 20 outcomes, youth-serving organizations across Ontario can work towards a common goal by altering their choice of service provision to fit this framework.

*Stepping Up* uses an "ecological model" of development to conceptualize youth (pp. 21). The ecological model places the youth at the center, and locates the seven themes in concentric circles that revolve around the youth. Themes that reflect a more immediate need, such as health & wellness, are located closest to the youth and reflect important early interactions, while themes located towards the outskirts of the model reflect latent needs that develop over time, such as civic engagement and youth leadership. Youth development entails successfully traversing these circles with the result that youth emerge as fully formed adults, able to integrate into their social context.

To monitor the progress of this goal, the government of Ontario created a profile of youth wellbeing that lays out a set of 52 indicators for the changing situation of Ontario’s youth. This profile is meant to monitor annual change over a number of years, specifically focusing on youth that face “multiple barriers” (pp. 12) to success, such as racialized, newcomer, aboriginal, disabled, LGBTQ+, francophone, rural, and poor youth, youth leaving care, and youth in conflict with law. However, the profile of youth wellbeing is based on aggregated data that does not differentiate along lines of social difference, and the province acknowledges that limitations in sampling and data
collection entail underrepresentation of certain marginalized groups of youth (pp. 95).

Beyond annually publishing the profile of youth well being, the government also commits to seven long-term action steps in their implementation of *Stepping Up*: Providing positive leadership; focus on marginalized youth; supporting collaboration; increasing youth voice; increasing capacity to serve marginalized youth; supporting research; and providing updates on Ontario’s youth (pp. 99).

With the conceptual tools of dialectical historical materialism, it becomes clear that *Stepping Up* follows the same mode of abstraction as *Stepping Stones*. In *Stepping Up*, youth are ideologically conceptualized as a category apart from their social relations. The youth of *Stepping Up* are able to journey from disadvantaged to successful in society, with the right blend of support and opportunity. *Stepping Up* considers these strategies of development replicable across the province. They are meant to foster a recipe for success within the individual, as opposed to within a certain group or demographic. Youth enter into their engagement with *Stepping Up*, and with the state, as an individual, by virtue of what they have in common with all other individuals. Any form of emancipation they can derive from this engagement follows the form of political emancipation. The political emancipation of youth in Ontario’s youth policy framework presupposes the existence of unequal social relations among youth by abstracting youth from these relations. Youth identity is defined according to the position of each youth, regardless of how their group membership might affect this position. Positive social connections are seen as developing out of this framework once the
requisite steps have been fulfilled; whatever pre-existing relationships youth might hold are not discussed.

The question of context is considered in the opening pages of *Stepping Up* (MCYS, 2013, pp. 10-14). However, context is peripheral to how youth are conceptualized. This is evident when the characteristics of Ontario youth are articulated as a series of chosen behaviours by individual youth: For example, delayed transitions to adulthood are "choices" (pp. 11), and the working of multiple jobs is taken as an initiative to develop the skills needed to "succeed in the modern workplace and drive the economy" (pp. 11). The province acknowledges that diverse groups of youth have diverse needs (pp. 12-14), such as racialized, undocumented, and impoverished youth. Yet in this contextual acknowledgment, there is no mention of changing the circumstances of racialization, immigration control, or wealth polarization that produce marginalized youth. *Stepping Up* claims a focus on “targeted support for those who need it” (pp. 19). Yet without an accompanying analysis of the social origins of why certain groups of youth need more support, programmatic interventions through this policy framework are limited to the individual. Context is acknowledged, but not theorized or addressed. Instead, *Stepping Up* follows the assumption that youth can be known, and meaningful programming can be designed, based on an abstraction of youth from this social context.

Perhaps the most obvious demonstration of the peripheral role of context in *Stepping Up* is in the articulation of the province's 20 target goals for youth. In the articulation of these goals, similar to *Stepping Stones*, risk-taking behaviour is
conceptualized as an individual choice in line with certain developmental maps:

“Supporting young people to make positive choices means helping them build on their personal strengths and try new things in safe ways” (pp. 32). The goal of youth programming is to limit both the extent and the impact of this risky behaviour (pp. 32-33). According to the ideological logic of this abstraction of youth, ‘risk’ is cut off from its social origins and reconstituted as a type of chosen behaviour that results from “participating in unhealthy activities” (pp. 32).

There are times when Stepping Up conceives of the broader social network informing the youth experience. Yet this social network is understood solely to the extent that it enables individual development. For example, target outcome four, “Ontario youth have families and guardians equipped to help them thrive” (pp. 39), indicates recognition that poverty and domestic instability create challenging circumstances for youth. Yet the problem is again phrased in terms of preventing the emergence of risky behaviour instead of challenging the social origins of risk: “Providing parents of youth with opportunities to receive help themselves (such as through counselling for at-risk parents…) can ensure that they have the tools and capacity to be better role models” (pp. 39; emphasis added). Here the epistemological approach to knowing youth apart from their social context is extended to adults as well, and individual interventions are promoted instead of social interventions into the historical origins of risk.

What are the implications of a policy framework premised on an ideological abstraction of individual youth? This framework posits integration into existing norms of
adulthood as the goal of youth programming. By ideologically abstracting youth from social relations, the state creates youth programming designed to encourage the self-management of social inequality. Within the context of contemporary Ontario, this self-management has the effect of internalizing Sears's (2003) lean ethos: The idea that youth should be flexible, innovative, and resilient to adapt to the reduction in public services, and the inability to conceive of value outside of market relations.

The themes and outcomes listed throughout *Stepping Up* reflect this emphasis on reproduction. Discussing outcomes for healthy behaviour, *Stepping Up* frames what counts as positive or negative risk taking behaviour based on the extent to which it conforms to social norms: Volunteering is lauded and smoking discouraged (MCYS, 2013, pp.32-33). The role of supportive friends and families is to help youth “successfully transition to adulthood” (pp. 39); again, the definition of what constitutes a successful transition is implicitly set by existing social norms. The goals of educational and employment programming, such as second-language learning and job shadowing, are framed in terms of their potential benefit to long-term economic integration (pp. 48-49, 60-61).

The remaining sections of the *Stepping Up* framework, which focus on diversity, civic engagement, and youth friendly communities, maintain similar objectives of reproducing social relations of successful adulthood: Supporting reintegration of youth in conflict with the law; supporting youth to volunteer in civil society; and supporting communities to provide recreation spaces for youth (pp. 72-73, 81, 89). The social, economic, political and legal relations that create youth conflict with the law, or that
govern the distribution of volunteer opportunities, or that determine why some communities have greater access to recreational space than others, are left beyond the purview of the state. The state can only politically emancipate youth: That is, the state can only acknowledge youth as equal members of an abstract political community, and presuppose the existence of unequal social relations by abstracting youth out of them.

Of course, I am not advocating that the government should not support youth that have come into conflict with the law. Instead, I argue that such an approach is insufficient on its own. In light of a deteriorating social context, *Stepping Up*’s repeated emphasis on developing young individuals, from personal health to community stability, can only encourage the self-management of unequal social conditions. But this approach to youth development is the result of the ideological and individualistic mode of abstraction that characterizes *Stepping Up*.

A major part of reproducing the social norms of adulthood in Ontario today involves the reproduction of the lean ethos, a mindset that prepares the individual for precarious employment. The lean ethos appears in the province's objectives for youth education and youth employment. *Stepping Up* argues that the world of work is changing. Rather than addressing the social context of increasingly normalized precarious employment, they phrase the issue in terms of a shifted demand for skilled trades and service work (pp. 47). One of the major goals of education is thus to ensure that young people "are prepared with the skills to meet this demand" (pp. 47). Helping young people manage the demands of employers means adapting to inequality and internalizing flexibility for the sake of integrating into the wage relation. The teaching
approaches needed to accomplish this objective are also framed in terms of their connection to the lean ethos and market value: “Supporting young people to develop these key qualities…requires innovative thinking and an entrepreneurial approach to learning” (pp. 48).

The province’s focus on education reform for marginalized youth makes the goals of self-managing inequality and internalizing the lean ethos all the more explicit. Training is seen as a method to “re-engage” marginalized youth by providing a “range of options” (pp. 51). Apprenticeships are also valorized as a worthwhile approach to securing opportunities for marginalized groups of youth (pp. 52). In these articulations, the employability of marginalized youth is ‘at-risk’, and the goal of education is explicitly framed in terms of securing employment to individually adapt to conditions of inequality. The economic conditions of marginalized youth in the labour market, disproportionately affected by trends towards precarious employment, are only considered to the extent that the province’s goal is for these youth to adapt to these trends.

*Stepping Up*’s approach to youth employment articulates a similar need for the self-management of inequality in the name of the lean ethos among youth. The province is quick to acknowledge that youth are the hardest hit in periods of economic downturn, and that higher levels of education are increasingly necessary to secure employment (pp. 57). Yet the programming response to these conditions supports youth by helping them through it, not by changing these conditions themselves: "Career guidance in schools, outreach programs, career mentorship, and job search supports" (pp. 58) are
the ways in which the province advocates adaptation to, and internalization of, the new reality of precarious employment for youth.

The lean ethos is most visible in the province’s focus on skills and entrepreneurship (pp. 60-61). The province argues that technology is an increased cause of youth unemployment and skill obsolescence, and considers dealing with this situation to be the responsibility of the individual: "Young workers need to be able to adapt to these changing needs by developing flexible, employable skills" (pp. 60). This also involves fostering a desire for entrepreneurship among youth, in the name of advancing the economy: "Strengthening young Ontarians' awareness about the benefits of entrepreneurship has been highlighted as an important element to creating a globally competitive and innovation-based economy" (pp. 61). This formulation leaves the challenge of economic recovery up to the entrepreneurship of youth, creating intense pressure to adapt to the lean ethos and respond to the "social challenges" (pp. 61) of Ontario. Not only are youth expected to self-manage conditions of social inequality, they are expected to individually change these conditions.

*Stepping Up and Stepping Stones* provide case studies for how ideological processes of knowledge production take place. Youth are known first and foremost outside of social relations. Youth policy can acknowledge context, but only as a peripheral force that programming must account for but cannot challenge or change. The result is that social inequality in education is re-conceptualized as “facing setbacks” that can be overcome by “instilling a sense of ownership” (pp. 51); precarious youth unemployment becomes an issue of making young workers “resilient, adaptable and
highly qualified so they are prepared for employment across many industries” (pp. 56); and fractured indigenous-settler relations are reframed in terms of “helping [aboriginal] youth navigate between cultures” (pp.67). In each case, the social origin of the problem is obscured, as the individual’s self-management of inequality and internalization of the lean ethos becomes the conceptual focus of the intervention.

Perhaps ironically, McMurtry and Curling called for the creation of a youth policy framework in The Review as a part of their recommendations to the province (2008b, pp. 24-25). They specifically request many of the ideas that re-emerge in Stepping Up, such as developmental maps, the strengths of all youth, and recognizing social differences. Yet McMurtry and Curling also called for a number of recommendations for the province to challenge the social context that creates the roots of youth violence (pp. 18-23). The mode of abstraction taken up by McMurtry and Curling, which addresses the social relations of marginalization, is different than the mode taken up by the government of Ontario, which obscures these relations. Stepping Stones has created horizons of youth programming beyond which the social origins of marginalization remain undisturbed.

Stepping Up has also created a programmatic agenda that not only leaves these social origins undisturbed, but encourages youth to regulate their responses to it. In the context of Ontario, this means the internalization of the lean ethos, that is the individual who is flexible, adaptable, and ready to respond to the needs of the market. The abstraction of youth from social relations, and the attempt at resolving them into the social relations of lean production, is refracted through youth programming and
experienced by youth in a distorted and contradictory way. In the next section, I draw on qualitative interviews with participants in a youth leadership development program funded by Stepping Up, to understand how youth experience, and learn from, this ideological mode of abstraction as it emerges in public policy.

**Conclusion**

In this section, I have explored how public policy has become a popular approach by states to contain the crisis of youth. Through appeals to best practices, shared collaborative efforts, and youth consultation in policy development, youth public policy in Ontario represents many of the common features of global youth policy trends. Yet the features of Ontario’s youth policy framework are very different than the report that gave rise to this framework, The Review. I have analyzed how looking at the mode of abstraction in each document can reveal the origins of these differences. In The Review, youth are known via their social context, leading to policy recommendations that focus on repairing that social context. Yet in Stepping Stones and Stepping Up, youth are known via psychosocial theories of development through life phases, and this leads to policy that focuses on aligning youth through these phases into social integration. In the case of Ontario, this involves abstracting youth from existing social relations of precarity and crisis, and resolving them into the social relations of the lean ethos: Flexible and innovative in adapting to the demands of the market. In the next section, I explore how young adults in Ontario experience this policy framework as it coordinates their learning through a leadership development program.
Chapter 5: State Ideology as a Site of Learning

Introduction

In the previous section, I mapped out how the state uses public policy to abstract youth from their social relations. This produces an ideological programming agenda meant to internalize the lean ethos and self-manage inequality. But the goal of this research is not only to map out the broader theoretical and programmatic implications of Ontario’s emerging youth policy ensemble. It is also to understand the effects of these implications on the consciousness of Ontario’s young people. In this section, I draw on data from qualitative interviews with alumni participants in a program funded through *Stepping Up* to explore how young people experience state ideology.

Participants in this study participated in a leadership development program that resonates with the state’s conceptualization of youth as abstracted individuals. The program has the stated goal of developing youth into innovative leaders. To achieve this, participants receive an environment full of ‘assets’ to facilitate individual flourishing, such as financial security and professional connections. The program prioritizes the individual development of each participant. The program recruited participants from a diversity of gender, racial and class backgrounds, and as will be seen below, this diversity proved to be a challenge throughout the program. The program is housed at a larger organization, which also serves to cultivate the lean ethos of entrepreneurship and innovation for the new economy. If the program promotes the lean ethos among youth, the organization promotes the lean ethos for society at large.
I draw from ten interviews with participants in a state-funded leadership development program. I analyze three distinct yet interrelated tensions to understand how youth experience ideology: The tension between self-needs and community needs; the tension between individual development and social change; and the tension between being idealized as youth leaders and the reality of navigating a precarious economy. At least one of these themes emerged in every interview I conducted. I use the concept of vantage point to explore how these tensions were experienced in different ways. I draw out a common experience of participants across vantage points: That despite the state’s attempts to abstract youth from social context, social relations re-emerge with greater impact on participants than the state’s abstract approach to individual development. I conclude with an analysis of the lessons learned from experiencing these contradictions in daily life, finding that the lean ethos is a central aspect of how the state is altering consciousness through public policy.

**Tension 1: Self Needs vs. Community Needs**

A consistent challenge for a number of participants stemmed from the conflict in the program’s community. Yet almost all participants described the community as one of the most valuable and transformative aspects of the experience. In this section, I focus on the origins of this conflict in state ideology, and the different ways it was experienced. I also offer a theory for how the most meaningful aspects of the community emerged at the moments when participants pushed back against being abstracted from social relations.
At the beginning of the program, anticipations about the collaborative aspects of the program were high: “I was just trying to figure out where I fit into this, because I kind of saw the program as a team based thing” [Bodie, excerpt from interview]. However, as the program went on, some participants described the community as inauthentic: “it was a forced community right, like it wasn’t natural, it wasn’t organic in the way that it developed” [Bunk, excerpt from interview]. Others considered the relationships with fellow participants to be one of the most powerful aspect of the program: “it’s really worth including how wonderful a lot of people there are, and how special it is to get brought together in close proximity to brilliant people that you wouldn’t otherwise get close contact with” [Marlo, excerpt from interview]; “the most meaningful thing to me personally is the community… I have a lot of good friends or really good relationships” [McNulty, excerpt from interview]; “I actually found that I made better relationships with people and like I had profound relationships and friendships” [Clay, excerpt from interview]; “It was eight months with some of the most incredible people that I’ve ever had the opportunity to share and journey with” [Kima, excerpt from interview]. There was a consensus that the formation of community was challenging but meaningful, and a divergence of perspectives on how that community formed and what the value of it was. Understanding the ideological origins of Ontario’s policy approach to youth can help shed light on the “fraughtness” [Marlo, excerpt from interview] participants experienced in the program community.
At the beginning of the program, there were regular group meetings, which were meant to provide participants a shared opportunity to check-in with each other. However, these meetings quickly shifted format to accommodate the individual preferences of participants:

We started to develop, we started to use open space as a way to say, hey if this is a conversation you really want to have, we’ll set some time aside...those who wish to have these conversations with someone, please go there, and have those conversations with them, and so the idea is that all these conversations would continue happening at the same time, but those that people feel are most important to them, they are able to be a part of. [Bodie, excerpt from interview].

Attempts at fostering a community were initially challenged by the individual differences within the group. The state’s theorization of youth dictates that these needs are best known, and best developed, by giving individual space to flourish. The result is that individual needs became the primary rationale for when participants showed up to some community events and not others. Taking individual motivation as the primary rationale for whether or not to participate in community events became a source of much tension.

Bodie thought that many people had high expectations for community cohesion from the outset, especially those coming from outside Toronto who were most in need of a new community. However, given the individual projects of the participants, there was a limited amount of time available for community building:

The hope was I guess, the community they left would be somewhat, not replaced but filled in on, or supported by the community at [the program], and it wasn’t that easy because we’re working on so many different things...some people just didn’t have time to be social as often as one would need or want. [excerpt from interview].
Bodie found that the cohort’s expectations of community before the program were lofty in comparison to the experience of participating in the program. Without a formal structure for developing community, the program implicitly gave preference to the development of individuals through their personal pursuits. For Bodie, this created inauthenticity and community disengagement:

I started to realize that people were struggling to a point of isolation, and I guess they didn’t feel comfortable bringing that forward… and like I noticed when we’d go back to the communal setting, that person would do their best to act as though nothing’s wrong, and the challenge was that there was a lack of recognition of the difficulties people are experiencing…and the one problem was that it led to a sense of disengagement, because people were like, I have other things that need to be taken care of, and they’re not taken care of here, so they would find it elsewhere. [excerpt from interview].

In Bodie’s experience, participants in the program would internalize an individual approach to personal challenges, as the time and space for community bonds was not present in the program’s structure. The result of this individual approach to challenges was that participants would disengage from the attempts at building community in the program. The state’s ideology of ‘youth development’ is individual: It does not include a social or contextual analysis of group development. The result of experiencing state ideology is a sense that state programming could not provide participants with the community bonds needed to navigate challenges collectively. Participants instead took an individual approach to solving their challenges. In lieu of a state analysis of social context, participants internalized ‘resiliency’ in order to meet challenges.
Bodie’s analysis resonated with McNulty’s experience as well. McNulty considered the privileging of individual needs and the building of community bonds to be contradictory goals at times, and this contradiction caused community tension:

[Program staff] would say, do whatever you want...you know what you need...do whatever’s best for you, puts emphasis on you as the individual, if I don’t like sitting around and talking about problems in my community or my group, if I don’t find that enjoyable, and I don’t have to, and I’ve been explicitly told that I shouldn’t if I don’t think it’s gonna be valuable for me, then why would I do it...and then you started having tension between people who...there’s people who show up to community stuff and there’s people who don’t, and both groups would get frustrated with each other. [excerpt from interview].

Here McNulty gets at the heart of a common tension in the implementation of youth programming based on the abstraction of individual youth from social relations: the contradiction between individual development and collective needs. The point at which this contradiction emerges, for example, in the sacrificing of personal time for community events, is the point at which state ideology, and the privileging of the individual, reasserts itself in the lives of participants. The logic of PYD encourages individual development as the principle goal of youth programming. This begins by validating an individual's needs over and above any sense of community that might emerge.

As participants entered into this contradiction, they sought to shape and transform it. Clay describes how the challenges of facilitating community in the program were a work-in-progress over the eight months:

The structure definitely evolved...it evolved because I think that everyone was very invested in making sure that this fellowship accommodated everyone...everyone genuinely wanted to do well themselves, but they also
genuinely wanted everyone else too do well, so it was a supportive community in the sense that everyone would take the time to sit and listen to everyone’s needs. [excerpt from interview].

Clay’s experience of the evolution of community provides an important nuance to my analysis. It is not as if participants selfishly disengaged from the community in order to serve their own needs. Rather, participants tried to navigate state ideology in a way that would authentically build community. I do not mean to say that participants were not interested in community. Rather, the state has produced a policy framework that limits the ability of program participants to overcome their abstraction from this community.

For multiple participants, this meant a withdrawal from the tensions of the community and a heightening of focus on individual development:

So I started for a while kind of like treading water in that turmoil, and then I started at a point where I just wanted to do my own stuff, and I just kind of removed myself from it…and it not being as much of a community and cohort experience, and it being more of a, just like me using this time and these networks to do my thing [Lester, excerpt from interview].

But I guess at a certain point it was like, it doesn’t really feel like there’s collaborative projects…I just gotta use this time as like, kind of more individually focused...whereas I think my mentality was more wanting to support the development of the program itself, as part of cohort one, wanted to help build this really cool new approach to education and learning, and then got in and was like, ok maybe it’s not quite there, yet as a program, oh but there is a really cool opportunity here to kind of fine-tune my own focus and trajectory, and get support doing that [Wallace, excerpt from interview].

There was this tension between…one’s individual pursuits and one’s relation to the community of people also in the program, and success for me needed to take the form of following this individual pursuit, [Marlo, excerpt from interview].

Participants experienced the dialectic between the individual and the social as mediated by state ideology. This ideology is an approach to youth programming that is limited in
its ability to see beyond the horizons of individual development. In this case, multiple participants collapsed into that ideology. Importantly, all of the above-quoted participants were white males, indicating that power and privilege play an important role in an individual's ability to more easily succeed in state ideology and individual development. In lieu of a theoretical and programmatic approach to addressing the needs of a community, and with a heightened focus on the individual as the object of development, it is no surprise that the individual was privileged at the expense of the community.

Multiple participants also noted that these conflicts tended to fall along lines of social difference: “that sense of diversity was present in [the program] as a whole, but when you looked down into the floor, you started to recognize that the diversity pockets were separated” [Bodie, excerpt from interview]. While participants considered community diversity to be a program strength, there was scepticism about the extent to which diverse participants were able to work together: “it was really, really challenging how broad a spattering of backgrounds and interests and disciplines came to the table, that's obviously where the asset is to [the program], but there's a lot of homework to get to the same page…and I wouldn't say it was ever actually adequately resolved” [Marlo, excerpt from interview]. For others, the fractures in community cohesion along lines of difference led to a questioning of the validity of the program:

There was frustration growing around the cohort…any group process is gonna have some of that, but it was to a point that I'd never experienced before…the kind of privileged dynamic really started to be a significant factor…what are we doing here, what is this actually all about, why am I here...to speak bluntly about it, there was a definite trend of like, women of
colour were far less, like they were not showing up in the space. [Wallace, excerpt from interview].

While the program acknowledged the notion of ‘diversity’ and celebrated it as a key part of the cohort experience, social difference became a challenge as soon as it came to alter the interactions and daily life of program participants. We can connect this to the state’s inability to theorize social difference in a way that would force the state to reconsider its conceptualization of youth.

Upon noticing these tensions, the program responded to concerns over social difference by organizing an anti-oppression workshop to discuss power and privilege. For some, this workshop was a formative part of the program: “I don’t know anything about race issues, I don’t know anything about oppression… I have never been so acutely aware of that, like it’s not just from coming to Toronto, it’s because of the anti-oppression training” [Avon, excerpt from interview]. An anti-oppression training, as a form of theorizing social relations, was an important part of many participants’ experiences. It reflects an attempt from program staff to move away from the state’s abstraction of youth from their social context. Yet other participants considered the anti-oppression training to be insufficient, insofar as it remained secondary to the program’s focus on meeting individual needs: “everyone who attended the anti-oppression training… I don’t know how many of the racialized cohort members participated in it. Anti-oppression is a broad thing, and ultimately if it’s not done as a team, I don’t think it holds” [Bunk, excerpt from interview].
Participants offered their own theorization of these tensions, and were aware of how an individual focus conflicted with community cohesion. Stringer likened the state’s ideological focus on individual development to a parent with good intentions: “[the program] related to people in the way that a confused parent relates to people, like trying to understand their concerns but in some ways being unable to respond to those concerns” [Stringer, excerpt from interview]. The inability of the state to respond to the concerns of youth around question of social relations and social difference is manifest in the program’s community tensions. Community workshops on anti-oppression still fell within an approach to development based on meeting individual needs. As such, it created tensions that remind us of McNulty’s earlier critique: “Why are you demanding I show up to things that I don’t see as valuable? Why aren’t you showing up to things that we need to do in order to do anything else? These are the tensions” [McNulty, excerpt from interview].

Lester articulated this challenge of experiencing rifts along lines of difference in relation to the friends he developed in the program:

I ended up hanging out with more white people and more males…and that was a huge level, a huge cause of anxiety…the challenging part was that I would hang out with these people and be like, these are great people, and then I would feel guilty about, and then I would kind of try to assess the way I did it [excerpt from interview].

What is perhaps most revealing about Lester’s experience is his reaction to noticing the community rifts. Lester’s approach of turning inward to discover the source of community tension was a facilitated point of learning as a part of the program: "there
was a culture there of, just like, really understand yourself, in order to do important things" [Lester, excerpt from interview]; "[the program’s] motto was inside-out, like before you go outward you go inward" [Bodie, excerpt from interview]. The state’s programmatic agenda does not have the theoretical nuance to conceptualize the relation between the individual and the social. By obscuring social relations from theorization, the individual becomes the object of reflection and development, not only to the inhibition of building community but also as an attempt to overcome this inhibition. Looking inward can be a valuable source of learning, and Lester’s instinct to do so was not necessarily misguided. But his approach leaves out an analysis of how the state has created a learning environment that fails to adequately theorize community building through social difference.

Multiple participants also thought that creating a shared set of group norms or group purpose might have helped mitigate the community challenges:

We didn’t ever really develop a proper constitution in the sense that we didn’t know what decisions were to be made by core members, what decisions were for all of [the program], so there was an ambiguity there [Stringer, excerpt from interview].

From the outset we just kind of jumped into everything, we never really established a strong basis for community, and we kind of talked about how we would behave with each other, but it was a very kind of abstract and arbitrary way, it was never really, like this is what we will do to communicate with one another, the way we engage with one another, and I think the lack of that shared understanding or that shared goals made it challenging [Avon, excerpt from interview].

Saying do whatever you want to a bunch of people who were really just meeting each other for the most part, um, means that they, is not a um, there was not really support for formation of community or shared sense of purpose or norms [McNulty, excerpt from interview].
For Wallace, this desire to intentionally establish a shared sense of purpose could have been extended to the entire 'learning trajectory' of the eight-month experience in the program:

Some type of like learning trajectory, something that's like providing some sense of shared experience amongst people, so that you don't feel like you're in this experience solo, like you're in that cohort of people going through a journey, rather than on your own [Wallace, excerpt from interview].

Yet this desire for group norms, structure, and shared trajectory throughout the program did emerge as an initiative from program participants themselves. When it emerged, the focus on group structure contributed to feelings of tension among others:

We spent so much time just talking man, and it seemed like the thing that most time went into was creating our own structure, which I found really bothersome, because I though the whole idea was to not have that, and to finally be in a place where you can work in whatever structure fits yourself. [Bunk, excerpt from interview].

Bunk considered the focus on group structure to inhibit the capacity for individual participants to flourish. Through these different vantage points, the paradox of the state's abstraction of youth emerges. Youth are conceived as needing space and time to flourish outside of social relations. Yet to do so in a community, they need an agreement for how to navigate the social relations that mediates participants' interactions. As the state has no theory for how social relations can be facilitated, participants are left to design these community structures themselves, and this prevented them from flourishing in line with the ideology of the state.

Instead of theorizing social relations through establishing group norms, the program's initial approach to community building was to align with the state's idealization of youth as leaders ready to flourish: "there was also no community building
at the beginning, it was kind of assumed that would just happen, because we all just like, we all had a lot of passion" [McNulty, excerpt from interview]. Bodie considers this approach insufficient to the contextual reality of participants:

I realize you just can’t pick 25 leaders and expect great things and expect them to soar together, because it’s simply unrealistic...because there’s so many different externalities that are not questioned there...to have diversity is one thing but to facilitate it is another thing [excerpt from interview].

Bodie’s analysis of the shortcomings of the program’s approach to facilitating community reflects the limits of the state’s ability to theorize the role of social relations in understanding young people. The state abstracts youth through an understanding of their common humanity, and builds its knowledge base for youth programming based solely on a theory of human development through aging. The result is that there is little room for an analysis of social difference. The extent of the state’s ability to analyze social difference resides in the commonplace acknowledgment that diversity is important, without the accompanying analysis of why it is important or how to facilitate that diversity. Instead, the state claims to merely put young leaders together and expect great things, while the social relations of daily life continue to operate with an overbearing force on the lives of youth.

The result of the state’s abstraction of youth was a lack of clarity around purpose: "it was really challenging to kind of grasp what exactly the program was and what exactly we were trying to do, as a collective, I think there were definitely greater understandings on an individual level" [Avon, excerpt from interview]. For multiple participants, this lack of shared understanding was a difficult experience: "it was
challenging because there was no equal ground that people agreed upon" [Bodie, excerpt from interview]; "the power dynamics at [the program] were, like, not explicit, it was too painful, it was very painful to be like, to not understand, to have so little control" [McNulty, excerpt from interview]. Through abstracting youth as individuals to design ideological youth development programming, the state does not eliminate power dynamics, but rather obscures them from focus.

McNulty theorized another force operating to produce community tensions: the communal internalization of the lean ethos as expressed through a constant focus on productivity: “there’s all these underlying pressures around product, producing things, and um, stopping to like hangout with your community, is not helping you produce things” [excerpt from interview]. The focus on productivity to the exclusion of community created an adversity to engaging in community norms throughout the program. This focus can be seen as one way in which the lean ethos manifests itself in daily life. It is not surprising that an ethos of flexibility, innovation and productivity among individuals has an adverse effect on creating space for communal reflection. Without an explicit focus on existing social relations, McNulty felt there was an implicit assumption that participants resolve themselves into the social relations of the lean ethos:

I think there was an implicit unstated expectation from most people who were there, that they should be working on things really hard all the time from the moment you arrived...if telling people do whatever you want, seems like it was intended to have the outcome...that people would do a ton of stuff and it would be really exciting, instead it had the outcome that people were re-thinking their sense of purpose and identity. [McNulty, excerpt from interview]

On the one hand, participants are abstracted from their social relations, and are asked to follow suit by focusing on their own individual development. By so doing, participants
raised questions of identity and purpose. Yet on the other hand, the lean ethos of productivity and innovation hangs above participants as the dominant social context, and so participants feel compelled to use this space to resolve themselves into the social relations of lean production.

The program embraced the different attempts of participants to begin individual projects. One participant described this the program as "the time and the resources and the supports to fail but to fail well" [Clay, excerpt from interview]. Yet the state's abstraction of youth from their social relations came as a barrier to building the community needed for this type of experimentation:

There was like two or three cohort members who did know how to deal with community dynamics, and they left the community fairly early on, because they didn't like what was happening, because they were like, this is not how you create a friendly, trusting, collaborative community where people feel as though they're able to innovate and fail [McNulty, excerpt from interview].

McNulty saw participants who considered the transformation of existing social relations as integral to building a community of experimentation and failure. Yet these participants were unable to form a community due to the state's conception of youth as individuals abstracted from their social context. As such, participants felt unable to establish the trust needed to create change according to the program's messaging. The social relations of the state act in contradiction to the abstraction of the state, with the result that participants experience a tension between individual development, community building, and productivity. As we will see in the next section, it is ironic that the constant focus on productivity blocked attempts at building community. State ideology also led to
taking the individual as the sole focus of intervention, blocking attempts at productivity in social change.

But first, it is important to understand how the relationships that developed were profoundly important for some people. Clay thought the program evolved in its ability to theorize social relations, and this evolution was a response to the needs of participants. For Clay, this evolution was a marked improvement in his experience of the program: "we need some kind of structure but we also need to be flexible enough to realistically meet everyone's needs...I think it was more successful than I think it would be, I think the way it turned out in the end was more successful than the way it was in the beginning" [excerpt from interview]. But for Clay, the program's evolution did not happen in abstraction: it happened in response to the needs of the community. To understand how positive cohort relations developed in spite of the individualized focus of ideological youth programming, it is important to look at how participants resisted the state's mode of abstraction.

Kima considered resistance to the program structure to be one of the first aspects of her experience: "pretty quickly there was pushback against what we were being told versus what we were feeling...and it was actually a really interesting, uh, openness, I would say, between the [program staff] and the [participants]" [excerpt from interview]. Not only was the pushback immediate, but the extent to which the pushback was a positive experience for Kima was the extent to which both program staff and participants were open to diverging from state ideology. For Bodie, this process was worthwhile as well: "having these conversations about race and equity, and these
conversations about supporting, developing a sense of community...it turned out to be a productive experience" [excerpt from interview]. The process of navigating community tensions and conflict undoubtedly yielded positive benefits and learnings for participants. The success of this process depended on abandoning the state’s ideological idealization of youth, and focusing on the actual needs of specific young people in a concrete social context.

Clay offered an explanation for how people came to appreciate community relationships from the program despite the state’s ideological approach to individual development:

It turned into a structural environment where everything was said or expressed as a deliverable or a requirement, and rules and such, but then we were kind of like, we challenged that, and we said if this is something that’s meant for us, to make the most out of, then why don’t we ask each other what we need [excerpt from interview]

Clay’s experience of developing transformative relationships began at the moment at which youth participants turned away from the state’s mode of abstraction. At this moment, participants turned towards engaging with each other as individuals with needs that come not from psychosocial theories of development, but from a history of social relations. In this way, Clay found the community to be supportive and flexible to the needs of everyone involved, despite the structure of the state’s programmatic agenda.

For Clay, building community through resistance was not only an individual act, but also established bonds of solidarity among participants:

I think that sense of community definitely developed when people were standing up for themselves, people were standing up for other people...and once you find two people talking about what's wrong with the program, you're
kind of like, you jump in and like, now that two people have already said it, I feel confident enough to say it. [excerpt from interview].

Clay understood this approach to building community as simultaneously in the interests of the individual and the community: “being vocal about what you need isn’t just saving yourself but it’s also about helping others be vocal about what they need” [excerpt from interview]. In Clay’s description of building community, we see how social relations assert themselves over and above the abstraction of the state. It was the process of pushing back against the state’s mode of abstraction that allowed for an alternate approach to community building. While many participants withdrew from the community in the name of their own initiatives, Clay found that it was through collective resistance to prescribed programming that authentic community came forward. Youth created resistance to abstraction, and grounded themselves in a community of local needs. How youth resist the abstraction of the state will re-emerge in the next section, where I examine how participants felt blocked in their efforts to create social change due to a singular pedagogical focus on the individual.

**Tension 2: Individual Development vs. Social Change**

A consistent theme from the interviews was a focus in the program on individual development. Participants felt frequently challenged to figure out “how do you become your best self” [Wallace, excerpt from interview], which was a core question that participants were asked throughout their experience: “[the program] at first intimidated me, in that it actually said ‘who are you and what do you want to be and what do you
want to do” [Marlo, excerpt from interview]. The self as an object of development was one of the most consistent aspects of the program, which was practiced through regular reporting on personal learning, reflection practices on self-awareness, and the ability to select which programming to participate in based on individual needs.

This focus on the individual came with an accompanying validation of the abilities and potential of the program participants. For many participants, this validation of the potential of youth and the accompanying freedom to focus on themselves was empowering:

Just a program to say ‘you matter, and here’s a program to explore what you want to do and who you might become’. Um, that’s a pretty sweet starting point, that I think like, could be replicated in a lot of different contexts…as like the initial starting point for a learner [Marlo, excerpt from interview].

It was almost like you can have everything, and everything we were told, every question we would ask we were told yes…and that’s exciting because too often in life we’re told no, and whether that is an explicit no you can’t do this, or a contextual no just because of the way things are. [Avon, excerpt from interview].

The virtue of it…it’s an acknowledgment by the staff of [the program] and by the government of Ontario that there’s some potential in youth, and in these youth in particular, that needs to be fostered, and needs to be recognized, and needs to be cared for. [Stringer, excerpt from interview].

Something about [the program], so [the program] was, I think I had, specifically from the program I found I didn't get a lot of specific help, but the, just the experience of having that time...was like, incredibly empowering, because I didn't, you know, when you have a job you're very focused on and this is your world, and with [the program] it kind of allowed you to see what was out there. [Lester, excerpt from interview].

It is important to locate these experiences within the historical context of youth theorization and state programming. This history consists predominantly of thinking
about youth in terms of deficits or risks. The accompanying state programming has used social control as a means of rectifying deficits and protecting youth from risks. Within this history, the widespread prevalence of PYD is relatively new. It is not necessarily that these youth inherently experience validation as empowering, but rather that the validation of youth potential is empowering in a historical context of having this potential previously ignored. In other words, being told yes is that much more meaningful after a lifetime of being told no: “[the program] kind of equipped me with the possibility of powering through and realizing my own potential outside of the circumstances that existed in my own life” [Clay, excerpt from interview]. The state’s promise of escaping existing social relations is all the more empowering when understood within a history of deficit-thinking.

Participants felt the state’s ideology through an ongoing emphasis on individual development as a site for social change: “the core document was...[each participant's] own document that essentially summed up how they as an individual wanted to grow, and in what way” [Bunk, excerpt from interview]. Participants experienced this individual development from the framework of PYD assets and deficits: "there was a great deal of self-evaluation, and peer evaluation, and trying to tease out strengths and weaknesses, and trying to capitalize on strengths and rectify weaknesses...and that emphasis on performance, individual performance, is pretty striking" [Stringer, excerpt from interview]. The goal of individual development in the program was the advancement of strengths and the reduction of weaknesses, in line with the theory of PYD explored above. I argue that participants experienced this theory in a partial and contradictory way, opening up
PYD and ideological state programming to the same critiques offered above. State ideology abstracts youth from their social context and does not account for how histories of power impact an individual youth's ability to obtain assets and integrate into capitalist social relations.

For many participants, the validation of youth from the outset of the program made the process of individual development more palatable. Avon considered the feedback and reflection that came from her individual development to be instrumental in her success beyond the program: “I really got feedback on my personal and professional style and how that needs to change. And so, that’s been critical for my success” [excerpt from interview]. However, she was equally quick to point out the impossibility of determining the collective social impact of individual development:

We brought up the fact that this was a ten million dollar investment over five years…and just kind of trying to figure out how exactly did the government expect to see a return on that investment because they’re investing in us, I always try to see it as a people incubator, which is exactly what it is, developing skills and capacity in people to then become talent that will influence the economy…what’s complicated with that however, is that you’ll never know the other scenario, there is no what if, there is no way to tie anything that we do, that is hopefully directly impactful, back to the program necessarily. [excerpt from interview].

Avon is sceptical about the extent to which individual development can be linked to an effect in the social world. Avon was not alone in feeling sceptical of the social impacts of taking PYD as an approach to social change: "if you take twenty successful people, run them through this program, they're still gonna be twenty successful people, and we can call it a success…but how much value did the actual program give to them, and to me, I couldn't tell you" [Bunk, excerpt from interview]. The scepticism of these participants
reflects the practical implications of the state’s inability to theorize the social effects of PYD.

While ‘incubating people’ serves a role at an individual level through skill development, it remains conceptually abstract from the broader social implications of these skills. In other words, it is not enough to give youth '21st century skills'. We must also ask, '21st century skills for whom? To what end?' As I will go on to show, the individual development of 21st century skills is a means to the internalization of the lean ethos. The state’s programmatic agenda for youth displays its strengths to the extent that it theorizes how to abstract youth from their social relations, and reveals its limits to the extent that it does not theorize how youth navigate these relations.

For Wallace, the experience of the ideological state programming allowed him to reconstruct new meaning out of past events:

It gave me the space to reconnect with myself...ok I’ve done all these thing but what’s the actual impact of that, like was it actually worthwhile, was I actually effective in these roles, was that all just a big waste of time, essentially, um, and also like, what motivated me to do that, it felt like these distant experiences of like, why did I do that thing years ago, so, it gave the space to be like, ok I guess, putting my own story back together [excerpt from interview].

Wallace’s ability to ‘put his own story back together’ is reflective of the approach to development taken by the state. Through this mode of abstraction, the individual becomes both the subject and the object of change: theorizing self-reflexivity is an individual experience, which leads to a renewed understanding of the individual. The subjectivity of the individual is the target for change. The result is a reconstitution of one’s life narrative through the lens of state ideology.
The focus on individual development became a source of tension for participants as well. Stringer was unconvinced that self-development was an effective means of grappling with the larger social challenges the program was meant to address:

There is this tension, like create a better self, create a better world, like that’s the process that [the program] is supposed to embrace, but interestingly, it’s not that simple, right, like you don’t just, you don’t say, ok I’m going to have a better laptop and know how to keep track of my goals, and then I’ll create a better world…that’s not really how we live our lives…maybe one of the shortcomings of [the program] was that it started with the subject too much, and um, put us on pedestals too high. [excerpt from interview]. Stringer’s reflections on the insufficiency of purely self-development can be read as an experience of the limits of an ideological conceptualization of youth as an approach to youth programming. The state is trying to make a causal link between individual development and collective social change: by developing the individual, we will cause social transformation as well. But by conceiving of these things as two discreet entities with separate trajectories of development, the state fails to theorize how the inner relations between the self and the social contribute to the transformation of both. Stringer articulates this shortcoming quite succinctly: “we engage with the world, we’re drawn into things…and then we see the world, we find ourselves needing to respond to that world, and then part of that response often is reconstituting ourselves in relation to the deficiencies of that world” [excerpt from interview]. Yet the state lacks the theorization necessary to account for this engagement with the world, and so participants can only experience the contradictions that emerge from a public policy that abstracts the individual from the social world.
For Lester, he found that it was only when he embraced his own individual development and stopped focusing on building community bonds, that he became able to accomplish meaningful work. Yet the experience also taught him about another approach to building community:

It was around the time that I felt like this community isn't gonna be a cohesive whole and I'm not gonna be a leader in bringing this community into a cohesive whole, that I kind of like, let myself be like, not worry about that anymore, and shifting my focus from being a really great community leader within this community of [the program] to like, um, ok I'm gonna try to do some projects while I'm here...it's this interesting thing about doing work together is that you build a stronger bond than if you're just hanging out together [excerpt from interview].

It was by prioritizing his own work and self-development, alongside the belief that community cohesion was beyond his ability, that Lester was able to engage in meaningful work. But Lester also found that this process led him to connect more deeply with the fellows participants he worked with on a regular basis. In this way, Lester's experience compliments Stringer's analysis: where Stringer thought we need to engage with changing the world in order to change ourselves, Lester formed stronger community bonds through engaging with the world collaboratively as opposed to engaging with himself individually.

Certain participants not only experienced the insufficiency of this theoretical approach to individual development, but also considered it to actively inhibit attempts at challenging social conditions. Participants often described how the program was advertised as a chance to do lots of work to create change: "it was designed or, or branded as something that would be very immersive, and that would require a lot of work, so I think we all had the sense from the start that there was a lot to do" [Stringer,
excerpt from interview]. Yet participants equally felt as though the program did not live up to this branding. Bunk describes his frustration with how this constant focus on the self took time away from potential work on social projects:

As much as, the program will say, there wasn’t a lot of structure, you’re free to be where you wanted, there were a lot of expectations of where you had to be when you had to be there, and the documents you had to fill out, the explanations of why you were doing things, and there was just a huge amount of focus on the self, like every single thing was about taking care of yourself, and assessing yourself, and it was like there’s a real lack of conversation and dialogue about reaching out and doing meaningful thing. It seemed really self-indulgent [excerpt from interview].

Both in terms of hours in the day, as well as in terms of mental preoccupation, Bunk experienced the program's ideological understanding of youth development as a distraction from attempts to work on social change. For Bunk, his own personal development was not his focus, and this quickly led him to experience friction with a policy agenda that solely theorizes individual youth development.

Lester also considered the program self-indulgent, but had a different interpretation of the value of this approach:

Like it is definitely self-indulgent, but whether that's a bad thing or not is a different question...I wonder what our world would look like if everyone was given space and time to think about what they should be doing in this world. [excerpt from interview].

Lester appreciated the introspection of the program to the extent that PYD reveals it's theoretical strengths; a heightened focus on the individual. Yet Bunk was frustrated with the program to the extent that PYD reveals its theoretical limits; an inability to connect individual development to social transformation. While the state’s approach to PYD was experienced as a chance to learn and grow for many individuals, it only functioned as
such if youth development was taken as the problematic. As Kima described it, they were "incubating people" [excerpt from interview]. When the problematic shifts from developing individual youth to changing social conditions, PYD becomes an ideological barrier to theorizing these conditions in order to change them.

Amidst a widespread recognition of an intense pedagogical focus on the individual, participants also felt a common pressure towards labour, production and efficiency in the day-to-day life of the program:

I felt like my experience at [the program] was a long discovery phase, and like, 'holy fuck it's time for me to build something! I've gotta do something! This is the most, like, amazing, risk free environment that I've ever been given, I have to take a crazy risk and do something! [Marlo, excerpt from interview]

But there's also this difficulty, I managed to navigate it fairly well but others didn't, but the responsibilities to [the program] and the responsibility to doing things, like change-making things, and like the sense that we all had, or that many of us had, that we're supposed to be working on [the program], in some ways was a barrier to some people doing things in the world. [Stringer, excerpt from interview].

Some of us took the fact that we were, you know, living off of taxpayers' money more seriously than others, and so there was this franticness about trying to, you know trying to accomplish stuff, whatever that meant, and so you were perpetually busy. [Kima, excerpt from interview].

These experiences expose how despite an overt emphasis on individual development over social impact, participants still felt a sense of guilt and pressure to produce and participate in the creation of social projects. There are a number of theoretical insights to be drawn from this. The first is the way in which the lean ethos, as the contemporary context of the state's ideal youth, comes into tension with the abstraction from this context that occurs through the state's theorization of youth. In other words, rather than
abstracting youth from social relations, the state attempts to resolve youth into another set of social relations: The relations of lean production, characterized by flexibility, innovation and productivity. Despite Bunk’s consideration that a “culture of production” [excerpt from interview] was lacking, participants did feel an individual expectation that they produce. Participants were aware that the state desired to resolve them into the social relations of lean production. The contradictory experience of feeling abstracted from existing social relations and resolved into a new set of social relations was a consistent experience for participants.

Wallace, who underwent a process of reconstituting his own life’s narrative through this ethos of production, considered his experience to be positive and empowering after the program: "I definitely left the program being like, yo, back into the mindset of feeling super inspired and empowered and capable of doing shit" [excerpt from interview]. Yet Wallace internalized the lean ethos not as a replacement of his existing social relations but rather as a means by which he could re-focus himself on changing those existing relations:

Young people are capable of making significant change, systems change, and also...the landscape we're inheriting as young people, whether it's around climate change, or like, the economic situation, or whatever, we need to fundamentally learn how to think in the terms of transformative leadership" [excerpt from interview].

Wallace's passion for his work after the program was not a passion for continued individual development. It was a desire to re-immerser himself in work that changes the social relations of being young. Similarly, for Marlo, his experience working on social innovation projects in the program was only relevant to the extent that his own self-
development was tied to an attempt at building new social relations: "this picture perfect social innovation challenge...didn't really like, add up or mean anything, unless we were like...really having a coherent relationship with our clients" [excerpt from interview].

Wallace and Marlo's individual development is all the more meaningful when the individual is conceived as internally related to the social conditions around him, and the focus is on changing the link between the individual and the social.

For Marlo, this period of discovery, in conjunction with an implicit pressure to produce, was a positive experience, insofar as it enabled him to explore new possibilities:

What was really cool about it was...you had carte blanche, you didn't have to report to anybody...and so if you had a cool idea you could just ping pong your way through the structure...you had this amazing latitude, and so once this project started rolling, it was a super challenging experience but amazing from a lot of perspectives. [excerpt from interview]

The freedom to develop a project that resonated with his own desires for individual development was an empowering experience. Yet it also created a contradiction between the state's abstraction of youth from their social relations, and the state's implicit attempt at resolving youth into the relations of the lean ethos. This contradiction emerged when Marlo recognized the lack of commercial viability associated with his project: "[the project] was cool, but friggin challenging in terms of making it a business in and of itself" [excerpt from interview]. Abstracted from their social relations, youth had the freedom to explore individual development, and work on projects that aligned with that development. However, this development happens beyond the reality of long-term viability. There is a contradiction between the abstraction of the individual from social
relations, allowing youth the chance to work on projects that lack economic value, and
the lean ethos of social relations that youth are meant to develop into, which reasserts itself in terms of economic viability.

Stringer considered the feelings of pressure and anxiety that arose in a perceived culture of production to stem from the way in which individual development was taken as an approach to changing social conditions:

I think part of it was how big our goals were, how overwhelming the systemic problems are, how the rhetoric of [the program] was very much about systems change, and although the language of systems change does acknowledge leverage points and pressure points, systems are big things, and when you’re acknowledging that there’s a systemic problem, but then claiming that you’re the one to solve it, it’s hard to live up to that [excerpt from interview].

Stringer’s analysis speaks to the limits of the state’s ability to theorize individual youth as agents of change. Under a framework that takes the individual as the agent of change, these youth were promoted as the individuals who would be responsible for solving the world’s problems. Yet without an accompanying theory of how change happens socially and through collective action, the responsibility fell to the individual to ‘live up to’ these expectations. Theorizing from the standpoint of an ideological conceptualization of youth, the state’s ability to help youth create change extends as far as helping the individual develop their skills, and no further.

McNulty considered the lean ethos to be a guiding force in the group’s social dynamics and community conflicts:

People were finding their own way but it was very painful, and it was not productive, like it was not productive to be having an existential crisis, like who am I, like it’s valuable, and [the program] could’ve decided, like I don’t
think it was every gonna go that way, but it could’ve decided, like oh, that’s ok, you know, like we’re gonna let people, we’re gonna keep this really open and just let people go through those crises and support people, and have a safety net for it, but I think instead we want people to come here and learn and create, and they can’t do that when you’re going through an existential crisis, so we’re gonna mitigate the crises. [excerpt from interview].

McNulty’s analysis brings forward the paradoxical juxtaposition of a state ideology that abstracts the self and an ethos of lean production in youth programming. On the one hand, the state’s goal is to abstract youth from their social relations, encouraging them to look inwards and develop fully. On the other hand, the state wants youth to develop into the social relations of the lean individual. Programmatically, this creates an experience of individual development that is partial and incomplete: youth can develop their skills in flexibility and innovation, but not their existential crises of identity. The extent to which development does not fit the lean ethos is the extent to which it puts the lean ethos ‘at-risk’ and falls outside of the theoretical framework of the state’s youth programming. These experiences of contradiction in theoretical implementation led many of my research participants to articulate a third tension in their experience: the tension between what participants were told and what they were feeling.

Tension 3: Idealized Youth vs. Precarious Reality

Multiple participants commented on how their expectations of the programming did not line up with their daily reality. The state and the program had lofty goals for the potential of youth, but participants felt that these goals were not actualized:

I mean the implicit message was you guys are awesome, you can do anything, which is a great message, but I think we felt like it wasn't the case, I think
people suffered a lot from a gap between the expectation and the actual possibility of them doing these things, which were undefined, and so that gulf between what we were being told about ourselves, implicitly and explicitly, and our actual capacity to create change, I think people felt that as a real incongruity. [Stringer, excerpt from interview].

I think everyone showed up, and like, was really, had really high expectations for how awesome it was gonna be...and we got there and like, the first week already people were like, freaking out. [McNulty, excerpt from interview].

I think it was largely the, like a disconnect between what people's expectations were, it was like because the program was still in formation and like, the way in which it was communicated was you can make this whatever you want. [Wallace, excerpt from interview]

In this section, I explore how the gap between what participants were told, as idealized youth capable of anything, and what they experienced, as young people characterized by social relations of crisis. I do this through two recurring experiences in the program: the tensions among relations of power within the program itself, as well as the anxiety participants felt concerning their future after the program.

Kima described a sense that the purpose of the program was to be an “adventure that you would be designing for yourself” [excerpt from interview]. This aspect of the program held a large appeal for her: “one of the things I really liked was the fact that we would be the first year. And so, uh, we would be making the mould, rather than trying to fit into one” [excerpt from interview]. This feeling of creation and experimentation is directly related to the process of abstraction that characterizes Ontario's policy ensemble, and participants felt this process through the messaging of the program: "[the program said] you at any moment in time and reality and any circumstance you're in, you're constantly empowered to make it better, um, why don't you choose to do that; this is an opportunity where you get to do that" [Marlo, excerpt from interview]. Feelings
of control, autonomy and empowerment came in part from the recognition that creating a program based on theories of PYD in the context of Toronto was an experiment, and Kima, along with others, relished the idea of designing this programming.

However, Kima experienced the expectation of complete autonomy in contradiction to the daily reality:

Right from the beginning, you have all, almost all you desire in regards to controlling this space, but then being told you know oh no hold off, justify to us, back and forth, like justify to the director and then justify to the advisory committee, and then justify to your fellows at some point, and it was just a lot of back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, which essentially was, I felt like a stall tactic, because by the time anything got rolling, your time was up [Kima, excerpt from interview].

Kima’s frustration at the bureaucratic back and forth that characterized her attempts to get things done reflects a conceptual inadequacy of the state’s ideology: There is no analysis of how participants navigate pre-existing social relations. The program instead tried to create a vacuum of abstraction, where participants could escape existing social relations and create change within this idealized realm of interaction.

But this vacuum collapsed as soon as it became necessary to re-engage with the organizational structures that lie beyond the theoretical horizons of PYD:

There were certain times when we were told that there was no hierarchy in the program, that you know we’re all equal and it’s all open-ended, but that clearly wasn’t the case…so like, there was a lot of sort of attempt to, you know, convey the message that no we’re all equal, you have all the authority you want, but we were playing by some sort of rules and we weren’t always told what the rules were [Kima, excerpt from interview].

The experience of letdown was almost inevitable: participants were told that they would be develop themselves outside of social relations, yet these relations reassert themselves in the lives of participants, in this case in the form of organizational power
structures. The resulting experience of unspoken rules reflects an untheorized world of social relations that operates behind the scenes of the state’s ideology.

McNulty located this contradiction not only in the bureaucratic structures of the larger organization but also within the program itself:

There was this huge thing that it felt like there were secret rules, like we talk about this program as though you can do whatever you want, and that it’s an equal power structure, but it’s not, there are obviously people with more power...we’re told we can do whatever we want, but we can’t, because we don’t have control over the existing program itself [excerpt from interview].

The inability of the program to live up to the expectation of complete autonomy was felt through the unequal power relations that existed between participants and program staff, and reflects the extent to which the state’s youth programming agenda is not necessarily designed to serve the needs of youth beyond their individual development. The limits in participant autonomy are found where participants no longer had control over the program design. It is no surprise that participants could not control every aspect to their desire; yet it is this experience in contradiction to the ideal of complete youth empowerment that created tension. The ambiguity around who has what level of control in the program created confusion as well: “the [staff] relationships were tenuous at times, because at one minute they were trying to be your friend, and the next minute it’s almost like disciplinary” [Avon, excerpt from interview]. The purported equality that results from abstracting youth from their social relations created an impression of an ability to relate equally to staff members, most of whom were under thirty as well. This impression led to tensions when the social relations of organizational power emerged.
This contradiction between the idea of youth as fully empowered to create change, and the reality of youth navigating existing social relations, reappears in another common theme from my interviews: the concern participants had about their future after the program. Participants repeatedly emphasized how valuable it was to have the space and time and resources to not think about money for eight months:

It was great, because it was space and time and freedom, and if you're motivated and if you're driven...it's amazing to not have to worry financially and to be able to do the things you've always dreamed of, and people take you seriously. [Avon, excerpt from interview].

Going into it I was like, oh I'm into this super cool program, the rest of my life is kind of set, I'm in the ecosystem, shit's just gonna work itself out [Wallace, excerpt from interview].

The aspects of the program that were really valuable were the fact that it was giving me a space to work out of, and the financial leniency to be able to take risks [Bunk, excerpt from interview].

Given the social context of youth and crisis, and the ways crisis manifests in Ontario through high unemployment and securitization, it is no surprise that participants appreciated the chance to escape this reality. Yet it is also an approach to youth integration characteristic of the state. Rather than intervening into the origins of crisis that create a desire for youth to have space, time, and financial leniency, the state selects a few young leaders to receive the chance to shield themselves from this reality. The state politically emancipates young people from social relations of precarity, leaving these relations undisturbed.

Yet the state's political emancipation of these youth fell flat when participants left the program. Avon remarked on the bleak prospects of many program participants afterwards:
So all of us were screwed...maybe three were at school, and five had jobs, so like we were given money, but in terms of jobs, we were hung out to dry, like coming into the program, it seemed like we're gonna help you, you're gonna get all these sick jobs, everyone's gonna be banging down the doors to hire you because we're gonna give you 21st century skills that all the employers want, and you're gonna be so hireable, yeah ok. [Avon, excerpt from interview].

Earlier I noted how important Avon felt skill development was to her professional future. Avon's remarks here should not be taken as a contradiction or lack of appreciation for the benefit of skill development in obtaining employment after the program. Rather, Avon correctly recognizes the limits that individual interventions can have in changing social conditions. Youth in Ontario face high rates of unemployment, underemployment and precarious terms of work. Given this reality, the development of individual skills can only accomplish so much. As Bunk said, "the money is not enough" [excerpt from interview].

Participating in a program that gave youth space and time to focus on re-defining their trajectories was a welcome shift from past mundane experiences in traditional forms of work. Yet Lester was also critical of the way in which the program promoted a version of entrepreneurship that was divorced from reality:

So I definitely realized that like starting your own company is more difficult than it seems in the movies, and I would say [the program] kind of maintains that myth a little bit, that you can kind of do what you want, but when you do it, you're like fuck this is really hard, and everyone's already done it before [excerpt from interview].

Lester found that the idealized universal notion of youth going forward to create change through new ideas was a challenging notion in its particularity. These challenges were not effectively captured in the program’s pedagogy. These challenges are also not
captured in the state’s ideology, which seeks to resolve youth into individual ventures without an accompanying transformation of the social systems needed to support these ventures: youth in the program were not given internal funding for their projects [Stringer, excerpt from interview] and were instead expected to use some of their living wages to support their initiatives [Avon, excerpt from interview].

Yet what is perhaps most interesting about Lester’s experience of engaging in an individual venture is how he learned about the challenges associated with it:

I got kind of like rocketed into having a whole bunch of contracts in this new venture of mine, so it’s been developmental in terms of that…but not in the route that [the program] taught me, about entrepreneurship, I learned that while at [the program] pursuing this dream they concocted…even though their programming didn’t achieve it, being at their programming, and finding programming outside of it, um, achieved it. I realized how hard entrepreneurship was when I was talking to entrepreneurs [excerpt from interview].

Lester was able to learn and gain the skills needed to begin a career as an entrepreneur, but not as a result of the state’s programmatic agenda for youth. Rather, it was the informal interactions with organizational colleagues that were the most enlightening aspect of this skill development. Bunk discovered many new interests during the program through a similar method: "there are probably two or three big successes that the program did... that wasn’t setup by [the program], that was because I started engaging with other people in the building" [excerpt from interview]. Both Bunk and Lester had to overcome the ideology of abstract youth flourishing through enterprise in order to learn about the actual challenges involved in taking on an enterprise.
While Lester had success beginning a project and found it challenging to sustain it longer term, Avon was sceptical about the viability of program participants developing their projects as a way of avoiding a precarious post-program reality:

Youth entrepreneurship is bullshit...ok, we're gonna strap you down with a ton of debt...most companies aren't revenue generating for 3-5 years so how do you even convince people to give you money, and youth entrepreneurship, add in being a visible minority, or add in being a woman, or add in both, and good luck...beggars can't be choosers but we have to be because we just got strapped with debt out the wazoo. [Avon, excerpt from interview].

Avon's scepticism of youth entrepreneurship as a solution to youth unemployment does not reflect her concerns with the program. She does not fault the program for not focusing on revenue generation as a part of the projects of each participant: "this is not an incubator for that...yeah we're supposed to do a bunch of different projects, but they're projects...it might be a whole multiplicity of things" [excerpt from interview]. Avon is quick to understand that the role of the program is not to help participants develop projects for beyond the program, but rather to help participants develop projects in abstraction. But Avon is equally quick to recognize the insufficiency of developing projects in abstraction as a means to overcoming the unequal social relations, poor employment prospects, and increasingly high rates of debt that characterize Ontario youth today.

Other participants quickly realized that the development of their abstract skills was only valuable to the extent that these skills would provide future leverage in navigating a precarious economy after the program. Regarding switching the project he was working on, Bodie rationalized his decision through the need to focus on being employed after the program:
I felt like I didn’t come to [the program] to do that… it became one of my bigger projects… and that’s not something I can openly talk about in an interview that I developed over the course of [the program], I can’t speak to that to an employer. [Excerpt from interview].

The idealization of youth flourishing as intrinsically valuable for each individual only holds interest to participants to the extent that they are insulated from the effects of the precarious economy as a social context, as they were for a brief period of time in this program. Once their future in the precarious economy re-emerges in the minds of participants, they reconfigured their version of development to fall in line with the demands of this economy. At the mid-program retreat, Bunk considered the program’s inability to understand this to be one of its major failings:

I remember in this like, retreat, there was a point where… [a staff] made a response of you know like, what we’re giving you here is like, a deeper understanding of how to be enthusiastic, and like, integrity, and this and that, and I remember the response being like, yo I can’t put that on a resume, what’s this actually giving me [excerpt from interview].

Participants were well aware throughout the program that this was an eight-month experience. Whatever emotional turmoil arose from self-needs being privileged over community needs, or individual development to the exclusion of social change, the reality was that participants were going to re-enter a precarious economy at the end of the program.

This reality came to preoccupy the minds of several participants, as individual development as an end in itself was quickly replaced by the need to obtain material security after the program. For this reason, Stringer lauded the program for offering transition funding to participants at the end of the program:
[The program] is to be commended for the transition funding that came at the end...and was carried a month, two months forward, and basically for those who didn’t have employment immediately afterwards, provided support, and for those who did, provided a great incentive to stay engaged, an incentive to participate in the final events, and then also just a resource to draw on to continue the work that [the program] was all about. [excerpt from interview].

Transition funding helped participants to the extent that it functioned as a mechanism to assist youth in navigating a precarious economy. Yet transition funding is an individual response to a collective problem. The state’s ideological approach to youth development does not permit the theorization of collective solutions to these problems, what Bunk called “a youth movement around social change as more than just a buzzword...as a societal goal” [excerpt from interview].

Such an intensive focus on the individual without an accompanying analysis of broader social relations led many participants to feel as though the state was seeking youth development not as a strategy for social change but rather as a strategy for gaining political capital: "this program was a political thing...the second the cohort came on board, they had this beautiful announcement of like, oh look at all these unbelievable people" [Bunk, excerpt from interview]. The sentiment that youth development programming is a means for governments to gain political capital is directly linked to the abstract approach to conceptualizing youth taken by the government: "[the mission and vision] was so sanitized, and so obviously a public facing thing, and so broad that anyone could fit into it" [Avon, excerpt from interview]. Conceptualizing youth as abstracted from social relations not only creates individualized programming that fails to challenge social relations; it also creates opportunities for governments to promote themselves.
Because participants were abstracted from their social relations and asked to focus on their own individual development, Bunk thought that the contributions they were able to make to changing social relations were only tokenistic: "it was almost patronizing, it was like, we know you guys are smart, but we're not gonna put that to any real use, we're gonna ask for your input because it seems that's politically a good thing to do" [excerpt from interview]. Avon thought that without an ability to directly link the individual development of youth in this program to any broader social change, the program was really just an opportunistic approach to taking credit by the government: "I think of further down the line when you have...CEO's of these crazy science companies, and the government's gonna come back and be like, we made her, but did you though, did you?" [excerpt from interview].

At this point I have mapped out three broad and interrelated tensions in the program: self and community; individual and social; ideal and reality. I have argued that the state’s intent is to abstract youth out of the dialectic of the individual and the social, thereby resolving youth into a new set of social relations that is characterized by the lean ethos. But the state’s ideology has not resonated with participants. What has resonated, both positively and negatively, are the moments when the social relations of power and difference have re-emerged in the daily life of the program. In the next section, I explore what are some of the themes and learnings from participating in this ideological approach to youth programming.
Lessons Learned

In this final section of my data analysis, I review the different articulations of lessons learned from participating in the program. I argue that these lessons indicate a contradictory and partial internalization of the state’s mode of abstraction, as well as the lean ethos that emerges from this abstraction. I discuss the implications of these lessons on the next generation of adult learners.

Lester, whose experience in the program was characterized by a withdrawal from the community in order to focus on individual projects, articulates how this experience taught him of the importance of individual vision in leadership:

So I think a lot of times leadership is like, deciding where the flagpole goes and sticking it down, but like making sure it’s not your flagpole, and anyone can rally around it and make it their thing, but like groups are really hard at making decisions about where to focus their attention and effort, so sometimes when you have a really strong vision, just like doing that, but not having given up on the community already in a sense. So, like I wish I had started like a project earlier, and then created more opportunity for people to collaborate with that project, because a lot of people were just spinning their wheels [excerpt from interview].

Lester’s vision of leadership consists of actualizing an individual’s vision in the name of a community, and making that vision accessible to that community. In this mode of thinking, the individual precedes the community, and the role of the leader is to have the vision that the community can then organize around. In Lester’s case, this meant helping others join his project. Wallace learned a similar approach to leadership: “during the program I was like, I have a feeling of responsibility to get into certain rooms, so that I can open up those doors, so that if I recognize a problem, or I feel like I recognize a problem, that I need to actively like, forge those connections” [excerpt from interview].
For both Wallace and Lester, the individual as the site of leadership becomes a key takeaway from the program.

Perhaps Lester’s other major learning is equally important in understanding how the state’s ideological mode of abstracting the self acts as a pedagogical force in the lives of youth:

Also I had this great realization that the people who are like in these programs and the people who are like, not in these programs, like the only thing differentiating them is that they’re in the program or not in the program. There’s kind of this tendency to see people as this really elite group...[but] there’s not that much difference [excerpt from interview].

Lester learned that the supposed meritocratic reflection of ability that was indicated by selection into the program was an illusion. The state abstracted these youth by virtue of their exceptional uniqueness. Lester learned to abstract them by virtue of their common existence as youth, but also by virtue of their levels of social difference, power, and privilege.

Lester put the lesson most succinctly in the lead up to an interview. He mentioned that the program has the stated pedagogy of putting exceptional youth together to do great things. However, his experience was that if you put exceptional youth together, they’ll still be youth, concerned about the future and making friends [field note]. His experience was that the state has failed to theorize how important social context and financial security are for youth, a lesson learned within a social context of precarity. The state’s ideology did not translate into a lesson for Lester insofar as his contradictory experience of this ideology provided the ground for a more nuanced approach to abstracting youth.
McNulty’s lesson from the program builds off of Lester’s. She speaks to a similar experience of the program’s pedagogy, “do whatever you want”, and found that this pedagogy failed to account for the social context participants bring to the program:

I learned a lot from the fact that telling someone do whatever you want, um…can mean that you have a lot of unstated rules or expectations, because most communities have norms or expectations and to say do whatever you want doesn’t mean that that is reflected in people’s actual expectations or the actual norms that develop [excerpt from interview].

The participants of the program were not merely young people with potential for innovation. They brought with them a history and context that shaped their approach to participating in the program. Acknowledging and transforming these existing social relations is a potential starting point for creating community norms and expectations. But in McNulty’s experience of the program, participants were instead merely told to go do whatever they wanted, based on the idea that if young people are brought together in an environment insulated from historical context, they will flourish and innovate. Yet this theory did not manifest throughout the program, as participants instead developed contradictory and conflictual expectations that were shaped by their pre-existing consciousness of social relations. McNulty experienced the way in which social relations exert an overbearing force on the lives of individuals, overpowering the abstract notions of equality that are characteristic of the state.

McNulty also learned that the idealization of innovative youth labour was equally divorced from his experience of the program:

There’s no magic that happens from working on big problems, its just life. And what lifestyle do you want to live, that’s the lifestyle you wanna have when you work on big problems…because they were like, we’re gonna work
on big problems, and then eight months later I was like, oh that's just life [McNulty, excerpt from interview].

While the program promoted a romanticized vision of youth innovation, McNulty learned that this type of labour is labour like any other: It happens under a particular set of material conditions and is not exempt from the minutiae of daily life. In almost complete contradiction to the idealized vision of the state, McNulty learned about the importance of obtaining the particular set of working conditions, or lifestyle, that is necessary to fulfilling labour. McNulty learned that the particularity of the social conditions of labour assert themselves over and above the state’s idealized abstraction of youth innovation.

McNulty’s lesson comes at an appropriate time. The social context of precarious work for youth in Ontario indicates the way in which the particular conditions of youth labour continue to deteriorate while the state continues to abstract from these conditions.

Bunk’s lesson from the program was not only that the meritocratic assumptions of youth leadership development programming are misguided, but also that these connotations exact a heavy psychological burden on youth participants:

I spend the bulk of my days...thinking a lot about people who reached a high level of success at a young age...they talk about the weight of high expectations, the pressure of achieving like, incrementing in success repeatedly, year after year after year, and a non, just no idea really yet, about what happiness really is...I think we’ve really detached from the idea that everyone in society has a purpose in society, and that no one’s is more valuable or less valuable than another’s [excerpt from interview].

Perhaps most important to my analysis is the social context of Bunk’s lesson. Bunk gained this insight of the meritocratic foundation of youth leadership development programming within a program and organization that abstracts youth from social
relations in order to resolve them into the lean ethos. The program’s repeated emphasis on the exceptionalism of these youth carried with it an accompanying pressure for these youth to be exceptional. In the case of this program, this meant resolving themselves into the lean ethos of flexible, innovative labour. The impossibility of achieving this ethos, alongside the increasing necessity of doing so in order to overcome precarity, creates an intense pressure to compete and excel that Bunk considered detrimental to himself and his peers.

For Wallace, the atmosphere of competition and pressure gave him an individual benefit at the same time as he recognized its detrimental impact on the social dynamic:

> Seeing the potential power of conflict...competitiveness of people pushing each other in their ideas and their own standards of excellence...everyone’s trying to always one up each other, and it’s super annoying on a social level, but on a level of pushing your own thinking, it’s good [excerpt from interview].

Wallace experienced the tension that emerges between individuals when they relate to each other under the ideology of the liberal democratic state, where the only human bonds that exist are those of necessity and private interest. To be clear, participants did form bonds outside of these market relations, such as bonds of friendship and solidarity. But Wallace speaks to the tension that emerges between bonds of solidarity and the individual bonds of capitalist social relations. In other words, youth not only created social bonds, but they created social bonds that acted against the mode of human cooperation intrinsic to lean production and liberal democracy. The result is a social environment that is simultaneously competitive and collaborative. Wallace experienced the way in which such an environment can be both detrimental to social cohesion even as it propelled him greater individual levels of accomplishment.
Other participants learned scepticism regarding the extent to which youth are capable of flourishing through youth development in abstraction. For Kima, Avon and Bunk, a missing component of the program was an intergenerational dimension:

I think that one of the takeaways of the experience, was that maybe young people can’t do everything, maybe you need someone to be supervising you. [Kima, excerpt from interview].

I think had we had a more intergenerational spread among the [staff]…I’m not saying it has to be run by older people, I think it was really good that it was run by people closer to our age, but I think at least having more influence from an intergenerational spread…intergenerational learning is everything, because people are everything, and understanding different contexts helps you understand your place and time in history [Avon, excerpt from interview].

There wasn’t a single educator on the staff, there wasn’t a single person over the age of 30 on the staff, where was the wisdom, where was the teaching experience, where was the coaching mentality, of you know, young people to help get them to that next level. [Bunk, excerpt from interview]

[There were] not a lot of teachers, not a lot of people who had the capacity to, and it’s part of the nature of youth...you don’t necessarily have a comprehensive knowledge of a discipline or a topic [Stringer, excerpt from interview].

All these participants articulate in different ways what they see as the value of intergenerational learning: that it helps situate youth within a historical context and creates opportunity for greater levels of challenge and support. But these participants can only analyze the importance of intergenerational learning if they acknowledge a social dimension beyond individual development. By seeing social difference across age as a mediating relation of human interaction, these participants have learned to reject an ideological approach to youth development that obscures attempts to analyze what role generations might play.
Marlo found that the program’s approach to youth development was chaotic and characterized by a wide variety of disparate options for self-direction. Navigating this plethora of learning opportunities provided a key lesson from his experience:

It was like all over the place, and you had to figure that out yourself, which in a lot of ways is kind of the greatest lesson, like in a roundabout way, that actually is a really amazing lesson for somebody, like you can’t rely on somebody else to provide you what you think you want, ultimately it’s you at the end of the day who has to put that together. [excerpt from interview].

Marlo’s articulation of the role of individual responsibility in navigating learning fits perfectly with the contradictory mode of abstraction that characterizes participant’s experience in this program. The lesson learned is that only the individual can accept responsibility for the individual. The individual’s experience in this program, while it might have had a number of pedagogical shortcomings, was ultimately the responsibility of the individual. The notion that success in self-directed learning is an individual accomplishment shifts responsibility away from the state to design meaningful theorization and policy that addresses the social relations of daily life. Without this responsibility, the state can continue to abstract youth in contradictory ways. Marlo also learned to project the abstraction from social relations onto a future definition of success:

Let’s pretend for these eight months that um, like resources and connections, and relationships, aren’t a limiting factor…[the program] kind of enabled that, um, which I think successful learners or entrepreneurs believe that, in their day to day, they don’t really treat limitations with much gravity [excerpt from interview].

The potential for an individual to transcend their circumstances, in conjunction with the individual’s supposed responsibility to transcend, is a key takeaway for Marlo from the
Having experienced such an intensive focus on the individual, Marlo’s lesson is that the individual actualization of potential is the conceptual building block upon which notions of success and failure have meaning. Actualizing potential is the approach Marlo takes to thinking about youth and social change going forward: “how might we cultivate a culture of young people who are aware that potential exists” [excerpt from interview].

Clay had a similar reaction to the program: he felt empowered to transcend the limitations of circumstance, and saw this power as an individual assertion of choice and autonomy: “because work, or the room that we’re in, or the school that we go to, or the status that we have doesn’t determine how close we could be, or the fact that we’re friends isn’t determined by circumstance, we choose these friendships” [excerpt from interview]. Importantly, Clay situates this individual assertion alongside the support of a trusted community:

I think being successful has a lot to do with how you view where you want to be in life, and the ball’s in your court and you need to take accountability for securing those opportunities…I think taking away the philosophies of what it means to be successful, and embracing failures, is something that I took away, also conquering your fears and allowing people to support you when you’re too stubborn to let people help you or don’t want to admit that you’re struggling…fail well, you are your best resource, and be very trusting [excerpt from interview].

Forming community through pushing back against the abstraction of the state and recognizing each other’s contextual needs characterized Clay’s experience. His learning from this process of resistance still resonates with the notion of the lean individual as solely responsible for securing success. But where the lean individual rejects failure,
and does not acknowledge the value of the community, Clay has learned that the individual succeeds to the extent that they have the freedom to fail within a supportive network: “A lot of the time I have a lot of great ideas, and I feel like everyone should listen to me…so that’s definitely something that I had to unlearn, and I find with a group we all want to do well together” [excerpt from interview]. It is through resistance to processes of ideologically individualizing youth through theories of youth development that the importance of community is learned.

Bodie articulated a similar lesson from the process of navigating the community tensions in terms of gaining an ‘empathetic lens’:

I would say the most important one and the only one I try to carry over into my day to day life is to look at things through an empathetic lens…recognize people at the table not for who they actually represent, but for the experiences they carry…[in the program] it’s something I needed to put into practice and actually help support other fellows and also help understand [excerpt from interview].

Bodie found he gained a more contextual and historical analysis of people’s behaviours as a result of the program, in complete contradistinction to the mode of abstraction the state has used for understanding youth. Yet Bodie did not gain this lesson directly from state programming, but rather from the tensions that emerged through state programming’s overtheorization of self-needs and undertheorization of community needs. Being a participant in this conflicted community, and taking on the role of mending these conflicts, gave Bodie education in navigating the contested terrain of human social relations, despite the abstract programming of the state.
Participants learned a diversity of things from this program. Where the state’s mode of abstraction characterized their experience, participants learned about how little this mode of abstraction resonates with the world around them. Where the lean ethos became a major force in participants’ individual pursuits, it was internalized in partial and contradictory ways. Where the social relations of the community were a major force in participants’ experience, participants learned from these relations instead of the programming of the state. The common thread of these lessons is that the teachings of the state in its youth public policy agenda reflect a struggle between the abstraction of the state and the social relations of daily life. These social relations continue to operate in the lives of youth, regardless of the abstract approach to programming taken by the state.

Conclusion

The participants in this program experienced being a policy concern in complex and contradictory ways. Their experience was filled with learning, camaraderie, and transformation, but also conflict, tension, and frustration. In this section I have argued that these experiences can be theorized as an experience of the Ontario state’s ideological conceptualization of youth. By focusing on abstracting youth from their social relations and understanding youth development as integration into the lean ethos, the state has created a programmatic agenda that shepherds youth through this integration. Yet the ideal of integrating into the lean ethos is incongruous with the reality of social relations of precarious youth in Ontario. Participants experienced this incongruity in
tensions between themselves and their community; between the program's focus on individual development, and their efforts at social change; and between the ideal of youth as promoted by the government of Ontario, and the precarious reality young people face in Ontario. As a result of an experience fraught with contradiction, the most valuable learnings for participants occurred either through resisting or circumventing the state's abstract notion of youth. In my conclusion, I offer a theoretical grounding for this approach to learning through resistance that will elucidate an alternative approach to conceptualizing youth for policy makers.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this research, I have outlined the contemporary emergence of the crisis of youth in the Ontarian context through two complementary entry points: Youth public policy and state-funded leadership development. I have argued that the crisis of youth is a global trend. The crisis of youth is characterized by stagnant rates of youth unemployment, state securitization of youth, and increasingly visible youth-led social unrest. This crisis is a historically recent social phenomenon of advanced capitalist development, and provides a useful lens for understanding the recent emergence of youth as a policy concern for states across the globe. The stated goal of integrating youth into the social polity may in fact be secondary to the goal of preserving the legitimacy of the social polity itself.

This crisis carries with it a contested history of youth theorization, which has grappled both with theorizing the strengths and deficits of youth, as well as the relationship between youth agency and social structure. I have argued that, while progress has been made in recognizing strengths in youth, this recognition has come at the expense of a more relational analysis that might shed light on the historical origins of youth and crisis. Given the conceptual inadequacy of this history in theorizing questions of social crisis, I have turned to dialectical historical materialism as a useful theoretical framework for understanding the state, public policy, and youth consciousness in Ontario today.

I have also argued that the state plays an active role in mediating the crisis of youth. Not blind to the potential for social upheaval that could come from widespread youth in crisis, states are adopting contradictory approaches to empowerment and
securitization. In this research, I have focused on the conceptual limits of the approach to youth empowerment taken by the state. I have looked to the recent release of multiple public policy documents in Ontario as a case. By focusing on the shifting epistemologies of these different documents, I have explored the ways in which theories of youth development continue to theorize youth as abstract from their social context, albeit in a more positive light than previous modes of deficit thinking. This abstract theorization is intimately connected to a programmatic agenda that is centered on individual notions of self-development into contemporary capitalist social relations.

I have explored qualitative interviews with ten participants from a leadership development program to ask how youth experience state ideology in their daily lives. I looked at the different tensions and conflicts that emerged, and I consider these recurring tensions emblematic of the state’s abstraction of youth from their social context. I argued that by experiencing this state mode of abstraction within a social and economic context of precarity, these youth felt pressure to resolve them into a new set of lean social relations. Yet my research participants also found important opportunities for resistance, and many of the most powerful lessons learned, and relationships formed, emerged at the moments when participants pushed back against the ideology of the state. In this resistance, participants re-affirmed the importance of acknowledging, theorizing, and transforming existing social relations.

What is the value of using dialectical historical materialism to analyze the crisis of youth in Ontario? In brief, dialectical historical materialism lets us draw a different set of conclusions than PYD. PYD offers a theory that can help us understand how young
people might mature over time, and PYD might hold explanatory relevance to the extent that it deals with changes in behaviour and disposition that might otherwise seem arbitrary. But the explanatory power of PYD is only relevant so long as individual development is the problematic. When we re-conceptualize the problematic as precarious employment and social justice for young people, PYD falls short of a compelling explanation.

When we shift the problematic from individual development to social justice, dialectical historical materialism emerges as an important paradigm for understanding the crisis of youth. Dialectical historical materialism allows us to theorize how contextually specific aspects of young people's lives, such as precarity, racialization, and a history of being conceived as a 'problem', can be theorized as internally related to how we conceptualize young people today. In other words, young people are defined through their relationship to society, instead of separate from it. Society is also defined through the young people who participate in reproducing or transforming it. The result is a conceptualization of youth that gives rise to a very different set of concerns than the youth of PYD.

Dialectical historical materialism also gives us a conceptual framework for understanding how the state's theory of PYD fails to target the social relations of young people. The state's inability to target social relations is not merely a conceptual accident that can be rectified by shifting theories. In order to create an idealized realm of universal and equal liberal subjects, the state conceives of youth as outside of their social relations, or what we might understand as their fifth level of generality. To
conceptually shift towards theorizing and transforming these social relations risks undermining the purported equality of the state’s abstract political realm. But it also involves challenging the dominant social relations that the state seeks to resolve youth into, namely the social relations of lean production. As such, for the state to theorize the social relations of precarity and revolt that characterize youth today, it would not only involve challenging the nature of the liberal democratic state; it would also involve challenging the mode of production that necessitates flexible, innovative and entrepreneurial sources of labour.

Given these lessons, what conclusions can be drawn? The first is that public policy ought to acknowledge the powerful role social relations play in the lives of youth. Young people are well aware of the recent emergence of a precarious economy. Youth policy should focus on longer-term approaches to changing this economy so that the possibility of poor working conditions do not occupy the mental capacity of Ontario’s young people. Instead, for young people to genuinely embody the idea of freedom and flourishing that the state claims to strive towards, the state must actively reverse historical trends towards the greater levels of unfreedom manifest in the precarious status of youth.

The second is that youth programs must go beyond acknowledging diversity and must actively theorize the impact of precarious social relations on the lives of youth. Participants in this program were given financial security, ample time to devote to projects, and professional connections for a lifetime. With such resources, there is no doubt that many participants had positive experiences. Yet this allocation of resources
and approach to programming fails to address questions of social justice and historical context. As such, participants felt frustrated as soon as they attempted to move beyond their own individual development and towards creating social change. If youth programming seeks to enable youth to create change, instead of merely conceiving of youth as in eternal development towards innovative flourishing, there must be an accompanying analysis of the challenging social context youth are facing, and the opportunities for changing that context.

The third is that, out of the contradictions of their experience in this program, participants did internalize certain aspects of the lean ethos in a partial and fragmented way. Adult educators engaging with young adults must be aware of how this ethos has played a role in the evolution of the minds of a generation. Fostering criticality and resistance among these youth will require adult educators to verse themselves in the implications of young adults internalizing individualism and flexibility as 21st century virtues. Dialectical historical materialism allows us to consider the ways in which adult educators and young people might counteract the normalization of precarity, inequality, and securitization.

Finally, I hope that my research can offer insight for any youth who might be reading this. As a young adult myself, I have personally been profoundly affected by writing this document. I have come to greater levels of concern surrounding both the extent to which the lean ethos infiltrates contemporary social relations, as well as the extent to which the state has reproduced this problem by trying to abstract youth away from these relations. Young people seeking social change will find fertile content for
change in this analysis, as I have demonstrated the state’s role in reproducing social crises for young people. The state conceives of youth as individuals in need of development and integration into a precarious economy. By following this conceptual trend, young people in this program tended towards individualizing their projects for the sake of securing employment beyond the program. Yet when young people conceive of each other as acting collectively to change the conditions of precarity, perhaps most readily demonstrated by my research participants who formed bonds through resistance, an alternative set of possibilities for change emerge. Through a collective conceptualization of young people as generation, acting to shift social norms, youth can move the horizons of their imagination beyond individually integrating into market relations and towards collectively changing these relations.
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