
Book Review

Disconnected: A Portrait of American Youth

Desconectados: um retrato da juventude norte-americana

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For any individual above 18 years old, the idea of adulthood represents a source of anguish and anxiety. The process of maturing involves facing and adapting to new social situations, new challenges, and responsibilities. Consequently, young adults must adjust and learn new skills and competencies necessary to navigate this phase of intense life transformation. The book “Abandoned: America’s Lost Youth and the Crisis of Disconnection” (2020), by American researcher Anne Kim, presents an analysis of the transition process of young people into adulthood in the United States. The three main points discussed in the book are: the phenomenon of the disconnection crisis and the statistics behind the issue, the social forces pushing young people toward disconnection, and the possibilities of reconnection aiming for a productive adult life.

The author’s first challenge is to explain the phenomenon of the disconnection crisis in the concrete lives of young people as a broad social issue. According to Kim, 4.5 million young Americans between the ages of 16 and 24 neither study nor work. This number represents 11.5% of the total of more than 39 million young people in this age group (2020, p. 2). The author emphasizes that social and economic isolation hinders the formation of social, professional (and personal) networks, compromising the future of an entire generation and perpetuating failures throughout adulthood.

Comparatively, the situation in Brazil appears much more concerning. Currently, 12 million young people neither study nor work in the country. This category of young

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individuals, referred to as the “nem-nem” (“NEETs”) (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) generation or, according to IBGE, “discouraged,” now accounts for approximately 25.8% of the overall population of young people between 15 and 29 years old (IBGE, 2022). This highlights a clear failure in the country’s social and economic system, underscoring its inability to provide sufficient and suitable opportunities for a significant portion of the young population during a crucial period of development and growth (Silva Junior & Mayorga, 2019).

Before proceeding with the analysis of the work, it is necessary to clarify that the terms “disconnected” and “disconnection,” central to the author’s argument, do not refer to people without internet access, as they might seemingly suggest. It is not about individuals excluded from the digital world, but rather concerns a significant portion of youth disconnected from the economic opportunities of society. The term “disconnection” can be understood as disengagement, detachment, disaffiliation, uprooting, disbelonging, disadvantage, isolation, discouragement, among others. Sociologically, it is a social dynamic in which individuals, for institutional and structural reasons, become estranged from the bonds established within family, school, and work. The process of disconnection hinders and makes it impossible to form social ties, networks of friendships and professionals, and the sharing of meanings and worldviews for a significant portion of the population.

Anne Kim has structured the book into fourteen chapters, divided into four parts. The work also features a concise Introduction in which the author delineates the contrasts within American youth towards the end of the second decade of the 21st century. According to the author, there are two distinct profiles of youth in the United States: on one hand, the youth who embody the transformative and innovative forces of the country, represented by emerging political leaders and entrepreneurs in the fields of technology and knowledge; on the other hand, a significant portion of youth can be found disconnected from the best opportunities, lacking employment prospects, and with limited educational attainment.

The initial two chapters, constituting Part I, present the definitions of the discussion central terms and a diagnosis of the disconnection phenomenon, including recent developments in neuroscience. Part II contains five chapters that explain the social mechanisms of disconnection and the failed attempts of public policies. The five chapters of Part III encompass potential paths of reconnection and some successful social

programs aimed at young people. The two chapters in Part IV conclude the book. The last chapter, in particular, serves as a kind of conclusion in which the author presents seven suggestions aimed at reducing, or perhaps eliminating, the problem of youth disconnection, as we will discuss shortly.

The author begins the book with an excellent explanation of the meaning of adulthood, relating it to social status and the differences between the lower, middle, and upper strata of society. In an analysis similar to that conducted by Bourdieu and Passeron in *A Reprodução* (1992), Anne Kim dedicates particularly to observing how a young person's experience in higher education will be influenced by their social class background. Although higher education is conceived as an instrument of social mobility, it is often observed that, instead, it tends to perpetuate disparities and obstacles faced by those already in disadvantaged positions. For example, choosing to intern during undergraduate studies represents a gateway to a successful career after college. However, if the person belongs to the lower classes, this possibility will likely be discarded, as internships are generally unpaid and require long working hours.

Incidentally, the internship issue illustrates what the author refers to as "opportunity hoarding," referring to the mechanisms used by privileged social groups to control and monopolize access to resources that drive social mobility, such as quality education and assurance of better jobs. Especially in the American context, internships represent a professional experience for a minority of young people who, by the way, already have the material means and social and cultural capital.

Kim explains that disconnection does not appear as an isolated phenomenon whose responsibility should fall on unmotivated individuals, as if they simply decided to stop studying and working on their own. Disconnection is the product of "deliberate policy choices that make it impossible for some of the nation's most vulnerable young people to succeed" (2020, p. 24). It is a hidden aspect of the structural inequalities in access to education and employment that significantly affect the lower strata of the population. The author emphasizes that there is a promise of social mobility when a young person, especially from lower classes, accesses university in the United States. However, most of the time, what is observed is that many young people incur unmanageable debts to finance their studies. Thus, the effects of the "opportunity hoarding" combined with the absence of social programs result in both the reproduction of privileges for young people from wealthy families and the perpetuation of poverty for young people from

impoverished backgrounds. In theory, it does not mean that an individual from a lower class could not have a chance to achieve economic upward mobility, but rather that rich children receive advantages from a very early age, the author points out.

The book leaves no doubt that education represents one of the few available resources enabling social mobility. However, completing high school, entering college, participating in internships, and engaging in other culturally significant activities do not seem tangible in the face of the need for full-time employment to ensure the basic resources for a dignified life. Financial support from the family and the privilege of receiving cultural capital make all the difference in the lives of young people. For instance, the simple fact of not having to work all day already leads to better nights of sleep and a positive impact on college grades.

The portrait presented by Kim of young Americans is concerning. The phenomenon of disconnection represents a situation of social disadvantage for nearly five million individuals in school age and at the beginning of their careers. In many regions of the U.S., especially in rural areas (but not exclusively), young people are disconnected, without school and without work, simply because neither of these options is available. These are regions that the author refers to as “opportunity deserts.” Therefore, these are desolate spaces resulting from a process of increasing economic and social inequalities in the country in recent decades, and the absence of public policies for this population can have disastrous consequences for the country’s future.

Kim presents several life stories in order to broaden the issue of disconnection. The narrated stories represent different perspectives that help readers grasp the extent of the problem and make connections with reality. Usually, when we hear young people’s life stories, we only become aware of the situation. However, Kim makes analytical efforts to offer alternatives, concepts, and proposals that can prevent the reproduction of the same outcomes for other young people in challenging situations. The author emphasizes the need for more accessible social programs that help young people to continue studying and working. Kim mentions, for example, the “transitional living” program, developed by the Federal Government in all states since 1990, aiming to provide housing for young people during their transition into adulthood. Annually, the project assists more than two thousand homeless youth.

Although the author presents potential solutions to the problems faced by young people, she acknowledges that the programs do not always work as expected. Using the

example of housing programs for young people, according to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) (equivalent to the Ministry of Health in Brazil), the federal government spends approximately 45 million dollars annually on housing program subsidies (which represents less than 3% of the total HHS budget). In the year 2016, these programs benefited around five thousand young people in the country, but data indicates that there are more than 3.5 million homeless young people in the USA (Kim, 2020, p. 110).

The author mentions, more than once, that during the process of maturation, young people often encounter problems at school, in the workplace, and even within the justice system. However, young people from middle and upper classes, in addition to being generally infantilized, receive the benefits of “second chances” and, if necessary, the assistance of professionals (such as psychologists and tutors). On the other hand, young people from lower-income backgrounds, often prematurely “forced into adulthood,” have few opportunities and do not benefit from “second chances” simply because it is not an available option for the majority of young people from low-income families.

Anne Kim draws an interesting parallel between early childhood and the beginning of adulthood. Research shows that late adolescence marks a decisive period in people’s lives and has determining consequences for the rest of their lives. However, unlike early childhood, which in some ways receives some attention, very little is thought of in terms of public policies for individuals between the ages of 18 and 25. The author warns that without accurate diagnoses, it becomes impossible to know what policies are necessary for this portion of the population. What often happens is that at the age of 18, benefits and social programs simply disappear, and young people find themselves left to their own devices.

Kim hypothesizes that the absence of specific public policies for young people results from a significant generational difference since the majority of American legislators still belong to the “baby boomer” generation, born between 1945 and 1964, characterized by their attachment to work and the nuclear family as primary lifestyle references. According to the author, legislators (at various government levels) focus only on what they perceive as most relevant to themselves, essentially legislating in their own self-interest.

In the final part of the book, the author lists a series of programs aimed at overcoming the disconnection crisis. These programs include basic resources (food,

housing, and security), training (vocational and higher education courses), internship and job opportunities, as well as the provision of counseling services and the availability of mentors (or “super mentors,” as the author refers to in chapter ten) to guide young people. Programs of this nature can foster a support network and provide both material and symbolic resources that enable young people to reconnect.

In the final chapter, Kim presents seven suggestions aimed at drastically reducing the disconnection phenomenon: i) establishing public policies that reach all vulnerable young people and provide accurate data on the disconnection phenomenon; ii) investing in social programs that have been proven to yield positive results; iii) engaging businesses through tax incentives to ensure more paid internship positions and qualified jobs for young people; iv) creating opportunities for connection (school and work) to as many places as possible, aiming to eradicate “opportunity deserts;” v) reducing the gap between school and work; vi) a comprehensive reform the justice system to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, which is also responsible for perpetuating structural racism; vii) listening to young people and understand from their perspective the main challenges they face in developing into adulthood.

The statistics presented by Kim to characterize the disconnection phenomenon do not suggest signs of change in the near future. As time passes and the population increases, the problems become more extensive and accumulate. The author helps readers understand the seriousness of the issue, as the transition to adulthood can either be successful, leading individuals toward self-sufficiency, or a detrimental period that hinders individuals from achieving any goals. Disconnected youth can be a harmful aspect to the current generation, future generations, and society as a whole.

Anne Kim’s book is recommended for diverse audiences, especially Sociology, Education, Psychology, Social Work students, and professionals affiliated with fields related to public policy development. The author provides valuable information that aids in a better understanding of the field of various actors involved in the education and professional qualification of young people. The work can serve as a tool for comprehending the issues faced in contemporary Brazil as well, particularly in discussions regarding the so-called “NEETs” (“nem-nem”) and the precariousness of working conditions. It also proves to be important reading for teenagers and young adults interested in decoding present-day issues.

Finally, the book is recommended for all those who wish to live in a more just society. The author concludes the work by emphasizing that our investments in youth in the present reflect our collective vision of the country's future. The world we live in (and the one we want to live in) is collectively constructed. In this sense, it becomes necessary to critically reflect on the structural conditions of a generation of disconnected, disadvantaged, and abandoned young people. Therefore, it is essential to begin correcting the social mechanisms that lead an entire generation to failure.

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