
Betraying another generation

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In his excellent 2016 book, *Betraying a Generation*, Patrick Ainley traced a growing disillusionment on the part of British youth coming of age in the wake of the 2008 Financial Crisis (1). Despite the increasingly grand promises made for education, especially higher education, for which almost half of 18-year olds now take on tens of thousands of pounds of debt, young people can now look forward to years stuck in low-paid, insecure, boring jobs in retail and hospitality. Wiping 6 per cent of GDP from the UK economy and pushing the unemployment rate up to 8.4 per cent, the highest rate since 1995, the 2008 Financial Crisis left a new generation of graduates 'overqualified and underemployed' and finding that their qualifications 'do not guarantee middle class jobs, merely admission to the pools that are allowed to compete for those jobs' (2).

The years since the 2008 crisis have improved little for young people. According to the Trades Union

Congress, four out of five jobs created since June 2010 were 'low-skilled, low-paid and often part-time, insecure jobs in sectors such as retailing, waitressing and residential care, with an average hourly rate of £7.95 or lower' (3). Hiding real unemployment figures, self-employment within the UK's 'gig economy' increased from 3.8 million in 2008 to 4.6 million in 2015. Within this figure, part-time self-employment grew by 88 per cent between 2001 and 2015 (4). Meanwhile, young people and parents have seen higher education as a means to ride out the immediate storm created by the crisis, and to secure access to the diminishing pool of decent jobs, perhaps even a professional career. But the result has been a race to the bottom. Half of graduates in 2013 were unable to find a graduate role - according to the Office for National Statistics, there were 8.2m degrees in 2013, but only 6.8m jobs requiring degrees.

And of course, graduates competing for non-graduate jobs push non-graduates out of employment. In October 2014, youth unemployment remained at 16 per cent for those in the 16 to 24 age group, nearly three times the adult rate (6 per cent). Even taking into account the number of 18 to 24-year olds 'not in full time education' youth unemployment was 12 per cent, double the adult rate. 'Despite the gospel of salvation through education, changes in work and occupations have increased inequality and reduced the certainty of employment', Ainley concludes. 'For the majority of the younger generation, this has led to a serious mismatch between employment opportunities and their educational qualifications, expectations and aspirations. Instead of moving up, many young people face the possibility of downward social mobility into low-paid, low-skilled employment, so that the risk of being "underemployed" is at least as great as being unemployed' (5). Young people coming of age in the wake of the Financial Crisis, then, feel more and more like they are 'running up a down-escalator', trying to get ahead in an increasingly polarised class structure shaped more like a pear than a pyramid.

For youth in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, the future is even bleaker. The conditions described by Ainley have largely determined who has suffered the most, particularly due to the economic impact of the lockdowns imposed to stop the spread of the virus. According to the Resolution Foundation, the social and economic impact of the pandemic has been 'U shaped', which is to say that the youngest and the oldest have been most affected (6). The reliance of young people in particular on poorly paid and insecure retail and hospitality jobs - exactly those industries most devastated by lockdown - has meant they have borne the brunt of the crisis, with one in three 18 to 24-year-olds losing work or being placed on furlough, compared with one in six older adults. While the Job Retention Scheme may have prevented mass unemployment in the short term, the Foundation predicts that we are heading for somewhere between 11 per cent and 17 per cent of 18 to 29-year-olds being out of work when the Scheme is withdrawn. This is the same level as in 1984, at the height of Thatcher's war on the British working class (7).

Drilling down into COVID-related youth unemployment by education level, we get a clear picture of how a degree is not only today a minimum requirement for work but also a way for young people to shield themselves during a recession. At the end of last year, compared to a relatively high rate of 13 per cent of unemployment among young

people holding a degree (8 per cent in October-December 2019), the proportion of young people with no qualifications that were unemployed rose from 24 per cent in 2019 to 33 per cent. For those with only GCSEs the rate was also comparatively high, rising from 15 per cent to 19 per cent over the same period. While the Office for National Statistics (ONS) warns that these statistics should be used with caution, as they are based on samples, they paint a depressing picture of the deepening educational divide in Britain. As the Resolution Foundation points out, for graduates leaving education during a recession, the likelihood of being in employment three years after having graduated is about 13 per cent lower than it would have been had the economy not contracted. For those with mid- and lower-level qualifications, these figures rise to 27 per cent and 37 per cent respectively. In other words, not only is the impact of recession larger for the lowest-qualified, but it lasts longer too (8).

The silver lining in all of this is that the coronavirus will further erode the plausibility of capitalist ideology among Millennials and 'Pandemics'. Almost half of young people aged 18 to 29 still live with their parents. First-time buyers need to save for an average of 21 years to afford the deposit required for a typical UK home. As a result, one in five households are renting, double the proportion at the turn of the century. With the insecurity of renting and the dramatic rise in rental prices due to property speculation and social housing shortages, many young people and especially young families are being pushed into poverty. In 2018/19, more than a third of private rented households (37 per cent) were in poverty, increasing from 35 per cent a year before. Combined with a fifth of people working in retail and hospitality suffering from in-work poverty - with benefits no longer topping up wages within the Universal Benefit scheme - more and more young people are looking forward to a life of misery. No matter how hard you work, if you are a working-class youth, it is extremely likely that you will have to visit a food bank or take out a loan to pay the bills. This is in the sixth richest country in the world (9).

So much for meritocracy and Thatcher's 'property owning democracy', then. Young people were already furious at the lack of progress in tackling climate change, with Greta Thunberg becoming a symbol of a politicised environmental movement that also saw the rise of Extinction Rebellion in the UK and the movement for a Green New Deal in the US. In the years between the Financial Crisis and the coronavirus pandemic, we also had a vibrant student movement in 2010 that combined, on the one hand,

working-class youth protesting the withdrawal of the Education Maintenance Allowance, and the trade union-driven anti-austerity movement on the other. Some of the university students involved (including myself) then went on to work in higher education, joined the University and College Union, and played key roles in the 2018 USS strikes. Others joined the Labour Party and staffed Jeremy Corbyn's campaign team or swelled the Momentum rank-and-file, almost winning power for a genuinely left-wing, mainstream political party for the first time since the 1970s. Across the Atlantic, young people launched global movements for equality, such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, and defended the indigenous rights of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline.

I think we will see more outbursts of anger and frustration on the part of young people in the next few years. Some of this will be channelled into progressive causes, but we must also recognise that, particularly for working-class youth, this anger may turn into pessimism, and be co-opted by reactionary and neo-fascist political movements, which have also been resurgent since 2008. What, as educators, should we be doing to help encourage the former over the latter? One thing is for sure, with little movement from government in the direction of creating new, green jobs as part of a Green New Deal to 'build back better' in the wake of the pandemic, promises made for social mobility via technical education and/or improving higher education will ring hollow. So, we need to keep pointing to the central contradiction of 'human capital' - i.e. no amount of private investment in qualifications will save the economy from stagnation, or shield individuals from capitalist crisis - while arguing for free, lifelong education for all, funded by progressive taxation in the service of a socially just and useful green transition.

As educators, we also have a responsibility to be optimistic, recognising social movements created and led by young people as progressive, and not dismissing youth protest as naive or misdirected. One of the least useful contributions that intellectuals have made in the wake of the 2008 crisis is the endless repetition of the cliché 'It's easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism'. This may be the case for those that have given up hope, and there is a real danger for those exhausted by the failure of Corbynism, or of a lifetime fighting in vain for British socialism, to fall back on an economic determinism that sees the necessary collapse of capitalism in the face of multiplying crises, or, just as bad, succumb to a rose-tinted nostalgia for post-war 'stakeholder

capitalism'. Capitalism doesn't need our help in saving itself from climate change, global pandemics or just its own contradictions; it pays thinktanks, civil servants and politicians billions of dollars a year for this service. We need to fight for a fundamental change in the way we produce and consume, so these crises do not happen again, that will provide a future for young people that is better than the past, and hope rather than fear.

As Marx insisted, the educators must themselves be educated. We must be open to the new, youth-driven movements of the 2020s, and listen to the demands and needs of young people trying to change the world. We have experience and knowledge to offer, but not as a replacement for the organic experience and situated knowledge that is generated through renewed struggle. At the same time, lived experience must be critically examined and turned into demands for social change, and specific demands united with the demands of other specific struggles within an over-arching critique of the way the capitalist system generates the contradictions and social issues out of which these struggles arise. This is not to reduce any specific struggle to a Marxist framework, but to trace all struggles to their common root: the priority of the economic over the social, the private over the common. This process is not didactic, it is dialogic, and it is within this dialectic of struggle and consciousness that critical pedagogy can play its part. And there is no need to reinvent the wheel. The living and historical Independent Working-Class Education and socialist education traditions still offer so much, as does the work of Paulo Freire and others.

1. Ainley, Patrick (2016) *Betraying a Generation: How Education is Failing Young People*. Bristol: Policy Press. (See also Ainley, P. and Allen, M. (2010) *Lost Generation: New Strategies for Youth and Education*. London: Continuum)
2. Ibid, p37
3. Ibid, p36
4. Office for National Statistics UK unemployment figures
5. Ainley, p89
6. Resolution Foundation (2020) *An Intergenerational Audit for the UK*
7. *The Guardian* (7 October 2020) 'Covid generation: UK youth unemployment 'set to triple to 80s levels'
8. All figures in this paragraph from Resolution Foundation (2020)
9. Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2021) *UK Poverty 2020/21*.