

Education, training and the elasticity of youth

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Concerns about young people's transitions from education to work are hardly new, although traditionally these related largely to school leavers, whereas today securing and maintaining employment is increasingly problematic for much larger sections of the population. At the same time, words such as 'youth', 'young person' and other terms usually reserved for teenagers are now applied to a much broader range of individuals than was the case hitherto. This is apparent across both popular culture and official discourse but is particularly evident in relation to education and employment, and especially the way in which youth unemployment is now conceived. The acronym NEET was, for example, originally created to describe 16 to 18 year-olds 'not in education, employment or training' but, in Britain, is now commonly used to refer to unemployed individuals up to the age of 25. Elsewhere, the term NEET is applied to an even broader age range – in Italy and Spain, for instance, it is used to describe 'young people' up to the age of 29, and in Japan sometimes up to 35! Meanwhile, the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission (2015) recently referred to '18 to 34-year-olds' as if meaningful generalisations can be made about those within this age range. Whilst all this might seem slightly bizarre, the increasing 'elasticity of youth' is also deeply problematic – not least because it distracts away from the fact that there are far greater differences within any age-based classification than between any such categories. Clearly, it is nonsense to regard a 25-year-old Oxbridge graduate from a wealthy background as disadvantaged just because he or she is younger than a 45-year-old on the minimum wage or an old-age pensioner living on state benefits. Having said this, most people, though especially those from working-class backgrounds, face a far rockier path into adulthood than was the case in previous generations.

For thirty years after the end of World War Two, the journey into adulthood was, for the great majority of young people, relatively rapid and straightforward. Most left school at the earliest opportunity, normally to enter full-time employment, and usually leaving home, marriage and parenthood followed soon thereafter (Jones, 1995). Whilst unemployment was generally low, youth unemployment tended to be lower still, and the ready availability of work, increasing levels of prosperity, and relatively affordable housing acted in synergy to produce rapid youth transitions (Ainley and Allen, 2010, pp. 20-21). For young men especially, the movement from education to work was also often collective, and the mass transfer of boys from school into the various industries which then dominated local labour markets was commonplace. Girls and women were, however, also an important part of the workforce, and millions of females were employed on the production lines of British industry, as well as across different parts of the service sector. Meanwhile, the growing assertion of youth in music, fashion, sport and so forth meant the 1950s and '60s were, in many ways, a good time to be young and working-class – although we should not romanticise the past. Whilst employment offered a degree of stability that simply does not exist today, factory work in particular was often dull and deeply alienating (Beynon, 1973), and the general availability of employment masked the way in which some young people 'churned' chronically from job-to-job (Finn, 1987, p. 47). The workplace was also often a site of bullying and abuse, and the ritual humiliation of young workers was often regarded as simply part of working life. Meanwhile, sexism, racism and other forms of prejudice were widespread. Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter's (1956) book *Coal is our Life* and Young and Wilmott's (1962) research in the East-End of London offer vivid insights into some of the harsh realities of working-class life in post-war Britain.

For most young people today, the shift from school to work is nevertheless a much lengthier and more complex process than was the case for their parents and grandparents; and, for some, access to the traditional signifiers of adulthood – finding a job, financial independence, a place of their own and so on – has become suspended, sometimes almost indefinitely (Ainley and Allen, 2010). This had led some sociologists to talk about ‘delayed transitions’, ‘fractured transitions’ and the like, and it has become fashionable in some circles to argue that there is a growing rejection of adulthood (see Furedi, 2015). Such notions have some appeal: one doesn’t have to look too far to find middle-aged men and women dressing and behaving as if they were much younger, and notions of perpetual adolescence, the ‘crisis of adulthood’ and so forth have become popular amongst the chattering classes. But, whilst delayed marriage and parenthood, so-called ‘boomerang’ children *et cetera* are significant social trends, we should not misrecognise them as simply cultural processes. They are in fact embedded in structural economic change and can, in Britain at least, be traced back to the collapse of its industrial base from the 1970s onwards, and the demise of the traditional youth labour market which accompanied it. Education and training is, however, also deeply implicated in all this, albeit in different ways for different social groups.

Although education has always been a site of social control as much as emancipation, the great expansion of post-compulsory education over recent decades has, in many ways, become part of a more general attempt to ‘educationalise’ a variety of social problems. Whilst society has become more and more unequal and divided, various educational initiatives have been charged with the impossible task of resolving deeply-entrenched social and economic inequality. Meanwhile, the ‘Prevent’ agenda and the promotion of so-called British values in schools and colleges are supposed to act as an antidote to the rise of ‘violent extremism’ across society. Universities – or at least those outside the elite few which serve the ruling class – turn out more and more graduates whose labour market prospects are increasingly precarious and uncertain. The further education system then – if the mish-mash of public, private and voluntary organisations which now delivers FE in England can be actually described as a ‘system’ – supposedly provides the key to tackling a range of problems facing both the individual and the economy, whether this is ‘upskilling’ the workforce, increasing economic competitiveness or resolving youth unemployment.

The notion that youth unemployment can be resolved through increased participation in education

and training is not particularly new though, and there has, from the late-1970s onwards, been a series of initiatives, each of which, it is claimed, will make young people more employable and therefore enable them to find work. This discourse is, of course, rooted in supply-side economics and is part of a broader strategy which attempts to make us believe that individual shortcomings are responsible for a range of social and economic problems associated with neo-liberal regimes. The way in which Apprenticeships are currently being shamelessly over-sold as the solution to the intractable problem of youth unemployment, as well as supposedly being a viable alternative to university, is a case in point. It is also, in many ways, a cruel trick, especially for young working-class people and their families, for whom the word apprentice is traditionally associated with images of security and artisanship, rather than the various forms of fetching and carrying which, in many cases, have been reclassified as Apprenticeships (see, for example, Allen and Ainley, 2014).

Either way, the fact that each new training initiative – whether these are YOP programmes, NVQs, Apprenticeships or Traineeships – fails to live up to expectations is unsurprising. The way the British economy has been restructured means that most employers simply do not require large numbers of young workers, whether they are Apprentices or not. This, in turn, is symptomatic of a more general mismatch between the supply of workers and the demand for labour, especially for skilled workers. The problem, then, is not located merely in the structure and content of any particular programme or initiative but also in the nature of the labour market more broadly. Although employers’ groups moan constantly about skills shortages, increasingly the UK workforce is in fact over-qualified and underemployed (Allen, 2015, pp. 19-20). So, on the one hand, there is a general underutilisation of skill, but, on the other hand, graduate ‘down trading’ squeezes other workers out of employment for which they might otherwise be considered suitable, and into increasingly poorly-paid, low-quality jobs or, in some cases, out of the labour market altogether.

Different forms of education and training, then, perform different functions in producing and reproducing inequality. At one end of the market, various low-rent employability programmes attempt to prepare those classified as NEET for a future of labour market insecurity, whereas Oxbridge and other elite institutions are still largely the preserve of the privileged. The various layers of education and training in between act, in many ways, as a holding pen for other sections of the population as they desperately compete to secure whatever work they can. Here, it is difficult to avoid turning to the

Marxist concept of the reserve army of labour – although the term ‘army’ implies a sense of organisation and a collective spirit which has, in many ways, been crushed out of the old industrial working class as it has been splintered and disorganised by the effects of neo-liberalism. Either way, it is evident that education is, perhaps more than ever, implicated in the reproduction and justification of class-based inequality – and the increasing elasticity of youth we are now seeing is just one symptom of such processes.

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