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Complex Knowledge, Coherent Policy? Understanding and Responding to Young People's Needs in Times of Austerity and Crisis

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[Review of the book: *Young People and Social Policy in Europe: Dealing with Risk, Inequality and Precarity in Times of Crisis* Edited by Lorenza Antonucci, Myra Hamilton and Steven Roberts. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-137-37051-8].

I always find it interesting when (and why) the title of a book tends to overclaim its status and position in the literature, yet the subtitle captures perfectly its content and contribution to an important contemporary debate. A far better title for the book would have been *Risk, Inequality and Precarity in Times of Crisis: How Young People deal with it and How a more purposeful 'Welfare Mix' would help*. Despite efforts at times during this edited collection to strengthen the conceptual link between evolving youth transitions and a relevant social policy response, this book is essentially a collection of conference papers addressing key aspects of the former (though primarily labour market and housing questions), forced together under the banner of the latter. It claims both transnational analysis and national case study illustrations and it does this very well. But it falls short of an informed and comprehensive understanding of social policy (youth policy?) in Europe – in which I have been deeply involved over

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thirty years, and so can immediately spot the deficits and omissions within this text.

The words in the subtitle – risk, inequality and precarity – are well chosen, very topical and critical in any current analysis of the social condition of young people in Europe. They play out both theoretically and empirically, enabling the authors to move, differentially, between, for example, Beck's *Risk Society* (1992), and much more grounded illustrations of the characteristics of an unequal Europe, the disproportionate burden that has been placed on young people following the financial crisis of 2008, and the rise and rise of vulnerability and uncertainty for the young. The importance of this book lies in the fact that it points starkly to the fact that it is no longer 'disadvantaged' young people who are struggling to move in from the edge but, certainly in some parts of Europe, a majority of young people, including many who have all the credentials and characteristics that would have served them well, in terms of social inclusion and upward social mobility, in the past. Old formulas, old deals, old agendas and old thinking no longer apply. Young people 'deal' with their predicaments in different, and often new ways. And new conditions and circumstances demand, the editors rightly say, new policy responses at local, national and European levels. In most contexts and levels, such responses have been, to say the least, half-hearted and half-baked, if not downright destructive and malicious towards the young, as old welfare state arrangements, where they did exist before, have been dismantled. Young people have increasingly been expected to take responsibility for their precarity (or 'precariousness' – a similarly newly-coined term), now that they have 'choice biographies' to determine. And where they have 'failed' to exercise that responsibility effectively, through finding work, independent living and autonomous relationships, policy responses have become systematically more condemnatory, demanding much more from the young (for example, through expectations of 'volunteering'; *pace* compulsory unpaid work) in return for even minimalist levels of support.

The editors have pulled together a collection of engaging and instructive papers, clustered around two broad themes. Before these are presented, however, they endeavour to formulate a 'middle ground' theory that unites the sociology of youth with theories of social policy, notably around the idea of European 'welfare regimes' initially espoused by Esping-Andersen (1990) and subsequently tailored to the youth transitions debate by Andreas Walther (2006). It is argued that these typologies, which had already

struggled to accommodate the very different ‘welfare’ trajectories of the post-communist countries of central and eastern Europe, were now dated, following the economic crisis of 2008 and the drastic curtailing of welfare for young people in most parts of Europe. Instead, they posit the useful idea of ‘welfare mixes’, whereby there are three potential sources of welfare support for young people seeking to navigate their increasingly complex and challenging pathways to adulthood. These are not just (the decreasing possibility of) state support, but also the support that may be available (for some, at least) from the market and, increasingly, from the family, especially families that have benefited from asset accrual through stable employment, generous pensions and the incremental value of their domestic property, all of which confer both material advantages and psychological security on their children. Of course, many young people in Europe have very limited, or restricted, access to any of these prospective welfare resources, as the balance between their structural disadvantages (arising from class, ethnicity, gender and other factors, which now significantly include geography) and their personal agency and capacity to act ‘autonomously’ is still firmly weighted towards the former. That debate will continue to rage within youth sociology. Nonetheless, the theoretical contentions around ‘welfare mixes’ is very helpful; as the editors write:

... an analysis of welfare structures helps us to understand the process by which contemporary risks generate different forms of need among European young people. Welfare structures shape the extent to which young people can exercise agency, and the extent to which they are constrained by structures. An analysis of welfare structures there has the potential to operate as a ‘middle-ground approach to the contemporary conditions facing young people (p. 29).

I have to say, though, that I was already becoming rather frustrated by this text before embarking on the more substantive material. Not only were there typographical and grammatical errors that really should have been ironed out, but there were glaring factual errors that produced some doubt about the writers’ detailed policy understanding. For example, the Education Maintenance Allowance (strangely, a policy idea of mine when I was specialist adviser to the UK government’s education committee) was not abolished throughout the UK; indeed, it is still available in Wales. [This is reported correctly by Sealey in Chapter 5, in a footnote on p. 102, though

his policy presentation is also inaccurate elsewhere: the New Deal for Young People had four options, and categorically ‘no fifth option of unemployment’, not three. I was on the New Deal policy committee.] Similarly, also in Wales, the now abolished Future Jobs Fund was rebranded but has continued. I worried that, as with many sociologists of youth seeking to engage with the policy debate, there might be strength in theory but weakness in real policy understanding.

Moreover, the ‘theory’ chapter is phenomenally stretched out, dogged by often tedious repetition. The essential argument is simple enough: youth transitions have changed and continue to change (usually becoming more complex and tougher); welfare regimes have not kept pace with young people’s needs; the two need to be better connected and maintain contemporary relevance; ‘welfare mixes’ are a more productive concept for understanding young people’s potential access to welfare resources, and they can – depending on how they are constructed and the extent to which they are accessible – ameliorate or worsen the journeys young people are having to take in transition. This could have been said more concisely and crisply; I did not need to read about young people’s state of ‘semi-dependency’ (or parallel autonomies and dependencies), and other things, time and again.

I also felt that the editors might have given credit to past work that at least nodded to their ‘new’ theoretical formulation with regard to welfare mixes, even if it had not been explicit on this front. In particular, the chapter brought to mind, from long ago in the 1980s, the British (England and Scotland) Economic and Social Research Council 16-19 initiative (see Banks et al., 1991), where some of its conclusions were already discussing the growing complexity of youth transitions (arguments consolidated by the later ESRC Youth, Citizenship and Social Change research programme) *and* pointing to the ways in which more successful and effective transitions were contingent not just (if at all) on state support and more on what was then described as ‘hidden’ support from family and friends. Pat Ainley’s unsung but immensely illuminative study of young people leaving home (Ainley, 1991), part of the same youth research initiative, is a case in point. And my own interest in ‘youth policy’ derived not from academic thinking but from my own practical experiences as a youth worker when, in the 1980s, I witnessed that interventions in the lives of young people were becoming more punitive – more ‘problem-oriented’ and less ‘opportunity-focused’. A desire to minimise the former and maximise the latter has been

the foundation and driving force for my own extensive youth policy engagement, within the UK and beyond, ever since.

Having produced and presented their hybrid theory – as I have said, one that is very useful, despite the caveats and criticisms above – the first substantive section of the book is concerned with Precarity, Social Exclusion and Youth Policy in Europe. The first contribution, on youth poverty and deprivation, scarcely debates policy, largely on the grounds that an appropriate policy response *for young people* requires a far more robust grasp of the nature, extent and distribution of *youth* ‘poverty’ in Europe. Counter-intuitively, for example, Fahmy registers that some of the highest levels of youth income poverty are to be found in the Nordic countries, in part because income poverty is measured *within* countries (whereas social and material deprivation, considering the capacity to access some of the essential items for everyday living, has a common benchmark across Europe) and in part because young people from those countries tend to leave home at an earlier age. Indeed, though Fahmy, oddly perhaps given the book’s commitment to a ‘new’ theory around welfare ‘mix’, continues to dwell on the idea of welfare regimes, he invokes the idea of the ‘transition mix’, arguing that youth poverty is partly contingent on what and when transitions take place. However, consistently with the editors’ advocacy of a new theory of welfare and transition, he makes the point that income alone is an unreliable measure to gauge material hardship.

Arguably, his ‘killer fact’ is that approximately half of all ‘poor’ young Europeans live in just three or four countries. The trouble for policy is that the countries change according to the measure used: for income poverty it is France, the UK, Italy and Germany; for social and material deprivation, Romania, Poland and France; and for subjective poverty, Italy, Poland, Spain and France (p. 49). That France features in all three ‘lists’ should provide food for thought; it is not the country that would normally spring to mind first when considering these issues. Fahmy’s chapter, though it interprets European ‘youth policy’ far too narrowly around youth unemployment and the slippery notion of employability, provides an excellent cautionary note about not jumping too quickly to conclusions as to where, or how, we should position our policy attention. A clear understanding of the policy challenge in relation to youth ‘poverty’ remains elusive.

In contrast, the authors of the next chapter are relatively clear about the policy implications that should flow from the circumstances of precarious

highly educated workers. More and more young people have embraced the rhetoric of the knowledge-based economy, and availed themselves of expanded opportunities in higher education, only to experience recurring disappointment and accompanying disillusionment as their status and activity in the labour market is not commensurate with their qualifications. In a well-structured chapter, drawing on empirical evidence from a transnational study (of graduates in Italy, Spain and the UK), Murgia and Poggio explore labour market destinations (often temporary and uncertain work), their implications for private and social life, and the absence of any wider security or employment rights. In a telling observation about unpaid graduate internships in the UK (something I felt was rather overplayed in setting the scene, but then much of the policy context was, as one might anticipate, already out of date) and the distress these often fomented, it was noted that

Several of their stories pointed to the willingness of people with high qualifications to accept precarious employment if they perceived it as an opportunity to obtain a job matching their qualifications in the future (p. 73).

I was writing about such ‘trade-offs’ over thirty years ago, but then only in the context of the transitions to the labour market of unqualified minimum age school leavers for whom work experience (any work experience, however exploitative, including government schemes) was the critical determinant for having any chance of getting a job (Williamson, 1980). For graduates who have ‘entrepreneurially’ invested so much more in their occupational futures, a sense of going nowhere with no guarantees inevitably produces profound frustration. The policy answer, the authors suggest, lies in the provision of ‘social shock absorbers’. Different policies are required for different countries, according to the specificities there at points of entry to and exit from the labour market (as well as, often, within it), but some certainties are needed to counteract or complement the flexibilities that contemporary labour markets appear to demand, yet which have created precarious circumstances that have been captured so graphically in Woodman’s conception of the ‘desynchronisation of time’ (Woodman, 2012). The policy response proposed is similar to that conjured up by the European Commission as the idea of ‘flexicurity’, whereby individual security is assured while labour market flexibility is maintained.

Regrettably, young people have yet to be the beneficiaries of this idea, despite the implementation of the recent EU-wide Youth Guarantee. Precarity in the labour market with all of its knock-on effects for personal and social life and further transitions to family formation and independent living, we must be sure to remember, can affect young people at all levels of the achievement scale, from early school leavers to university graduates. Policy responses must recognise this and be tailored accordingly.

The next three chapters are drawn from single country studies, interesting in their own right and illuminating in terms of their detail, and so powerful for informing that country's social policy, though less so for considering policy implications for the wider Europe. Sealey brings us right back to earth from grand theories of youth autonomy and 'reflexive individualisation', drawing our attention to the immensely fragmented transitions of youth people right on the edge, whose social exclusion is sustained, not transformed, by government policies that are viewed with cynicism, family circumstances that require a contribution rather than act as a resource, and a resultant approach to the labour market that is characterised by taking what you can get when you stumble upon it. Those young people have very little choice, have abandoned the use of formal structures of 'support' and resort to informal sources to find work. Sealey's account of the overwhelming powerlessness of some young people resonated powerfully with me. This is a category of young people with whom I am very familiar, given my own research over the years, which started with a very similar picture way back in the 1970s (see Jones et al., 1981; Williamson, 2004).

Surprisingly perhaps, given what we hear of labour market rigidity in Greece (until the 'crisis'), precarious youth employment is not a new phenomenon, though it has, until quite recently, been well masked on account of strong family subsidies and support. Kretsos points out that, in current times of austerity, such intergenerational solidarity is no longer sustainable. As a result, young Greeks have faced the double whammy of both drastically reduced family incomes and a dramatic decrease in available job opportunities. Public policy has further exacerbated their predicament. Kretsos asserts that "the Greek case indicates that austerity policies do not work for young people" (p. 120). Indeed, the Council of Europe's recent youth policy review of Greece (Petkovic & Williamson, 2015) concurs completely with this view and argues for a range of training and employment policies for young people, despite the fact that these run

counter to the conditions imposed by the Troika on public expenditure in Greece. Meanwhile, Kretsos contends, young Greeks may be inspired to participate in further protest calling for more radical political and institutional change.

In Spain, where “young adults are more dependent on family support and remain in the parental home for longer than their European counterparts” (p. 125), the so-called *mileuristas* – well qualified, highly skilled, in precarious, low-income employment, aged around 30 - invoke a variety of strategies to deal both directly with their employment precarity and with what Gentile classifies as its instrumental, identity and institutional consequences. Some young people spring back, some fight back, while others get trapped or rise to the challenges by navigating new pathways. It is an interesting typology, arguably perhaps over-romanticised, but one which points to very different frameworks for any policy response, from assisting adjustment to supporting innovation. And this is but for one segment of the youth population in Spain: formulating policy is no easy task!

Part II is concerned with Changing Transitions, Welfare Sources and Social Policies. Chapter 8 endeavours to anchor the editors’ theoretical frame in a more empirical discussion of labour market risks and sources of welfare. Very like chapter 4, it explores the education and labour market trajectories of the ‘young precariously employed’, the resources they mobilised to cope with unemployment, and the impact of unemployment on their personal well-being and strategies for the future. Though based on a much larger study and sample, the findings produce a strong sense of *déjà vu* – there are strong similarities with other studies (and contributions to this book) both at a level of generality, and in terms of distinction and difference in clustered narratives from different groups of young people, and yet another typology to illustrate such differentiation. Here Maestripieri and Sabatinelli provide five profiles of work precarity, pointing inevitably to the fact that different profiles suggest different needs, particularly if young people are to cope effectively on the path between structural constraint and personal aspiration and agency. For once, the authors of this chapter do identify (p. 165) some specific policy measures that might respond to particular profiles: training, retraining, short-term and targeted work experience, counselling and social support. It is a good package. The thorny further policy implication, not discussed, is how to ensure that the right interventions reach the right groups of young people.

Attention then turns to the Nordic countries, often viewed from elsewhere as a model for effective welfare regimes, yet what does ‘universality’ – based on assumptions or requirements of full labour market participation – actually mean for young people dealing with increasingly uncertain transitions and precarious employment trajectories? Have systems adjusted to take account of the new social condition of young people? It is, of course, too early to tell; moreover, the three Nordic countries discussed (Norway, Sweden and Finland) operate their welfare regimes in different ways. Yet one trend is very apparent. Rights-based unemployment protection schemes have increasingly been replaced by means-tested and conditional poverty relief. Such allowances have, furthermore, been steadily reduced. This, in turn, compounds disadvantage for the most vulnerable, producing “a gap in their comprehensive welfare protection during the critical school to work transition for this specific segment of the population” (p. 185), and leaving young people being and feeling stigmatised because they are often not considered to be legitimate recipients of social welfare. In some of the most privileged societies in the world, therefore, young people face this double exclusion, especially the more disadvantaged.

France was identified earlier in this volume as a country with a disproportionate number of ‘poor’ young people according to three different criteria. Rigid labour market structures, and relatively secure employment conditions, have often made employers reluctant to recruit. Chevalier and Palier argue, however, that French youth policy differentiate two types of young people – what they call a process of ‘dualisation’. On the one hand, there has been *familialisation*, whereby young people (particularly those in higher education) are supported only through their families. On the other hand, there has been *activation*, an increasingly sophisticated package of measures directed towards young people (especially the low skilled) to ‘insert’ them in the labour market, including a secondary labour market of subsidised employment. Significantly, contrary to academic analysis advancing the individualisation thesis and the policy pressures to exercise the ‘entrepreneurial self’, it is argued that youth policy in France still adheres to a perspective of young people as ‘dependent’ – either on their families or on the state. As such, they do not have access to full social citizenship; and direct state support through social insurance or assistance is denied them. Paradoxically, such sustained dependency is enshrined within political claims that both measures

represent stepping stones to social inclusion and youth autonomy, when in fact they are doing precisely the opposite. Such contradictions, the authors maintain, are unlikely to go away.

In a sudden and unexpected turn away from labour markets, Berrington and Stone address housing transitions in the UK. Given the steady erosion of entitlements to housing benefits in the UK (up to the age of 35),

achieving residential independence from the parental home is increasingly linked to successful labour market participation and/or parental financial support (p. 211).

Young people are having to find new living strategies and arrangements in response to their changed circumstances, both in relation to the labour market and beyond, in terms of personal relationships and parenthood, increased participation in higher education, the contraction in the availability of social housing, and dramatically rising house prices and rents. The situation is particularly dire for young fathers who are separated from their partners but wish to maintain access to their children, for some rather complex reasons. In a sophisticated analysis, the authors conclude that “living independently may have become a less realistic or attractive prospect for young adults in the context of the recent recession” (p. 224). But co-residence with parents is a much more probable scenario than sharing with unrelated others. That is an assumed scenario that the evidence indicates is not in fact normative beyond the experience of students.

The penultimate chapter on Germany is provided by the distinguished youth transitions expert, Walter Heinz. His work is well-known and does not need further explication here, save to note the value in his identification of three fields of life-course policy that merit further attention. First, it is “crucial to pave the road to adulthood for the disadvantaged by learning and training in the real world of firms” (p. 253). Second, it will be important to encourage employers to engage more actively with declining birth rates, and to consider the recruitment and training of young people who have previously not been in their frame of reference, not least those from ethnic and other more disadvantaged backgrounds. And third – and this is a perennial transnational, but seemingly intractable issue – there needs to be more ‘permeability’ between vocational and academic education. Coming from a country where the ‘dual system’ has been routinely lauded for its efficacy, this is an important message.

In the concluding chapter of the book, two of the editors endeavour to pull the strands of argument together. Throughout Europe, albeit in different ways, many young people are having a tough time finding pathways into and through the labour market, a situation compounded by the retraction of state welfare support, if it existed in the first place, unless other sources of welfare (notably through the family) are accessible. Though research evidence suggests that, in these difficult circumstances, young people often

develop strategies for managing risk in the short term, and are flexible, resourceful and persistent in managing those risks, [but] the current context forces them to focus on the present and makes it difficult for them to plan for the future (p. 263).

The very final section calls for more integrated approach to youth policy at a European level, bemoaning the ‘fact’ that too much is focused on youth unemployment when policy responses to the predicament of young people in transition need to be ‘more complex’. This is a weak conclusion, reflecting some naivety, if not ignorance about the European youth policy framework. The authors are right to say that “state sources of welfare can effectively limit the consequences of labour market risk and ameliorate the inequalities that are reproduced by a reliance on families” (p. 265). However, beyond an illustration relating to the recent European Youth Guarantee (2013), very little is said throughout the book about *European* youth policy – which in fact has a long history and stretches way beyond issues concerning ‘fractured transitions’ and precarious labour market conditions - and though some interesting national youth policy developments and consequences are discussed in individual chapters, these have to be distinguished and dissected before they can be considered for transfer to other national contexts with often very different cultural traditions and histories, not least in relation to welfare.

Notwithstanding its flaws and limitations, I enjoyed reading this book and learned a lot from it. The academic evidence and argument is derived from an impressively broad range of methodologies. It is a very useful contribution to comparative youth sociology, strengthening our understanding of the need for calibrated and nuanced, but *coherent* youth policy if it is to positively address the diverse issues and needs facing (different categories of) young people across Europe. However, it is still

firmly an academic, research-based publication, grounded in precise and informed analytical and theoretical contentions but light, and often weak, on specific policy proposals. It is the kind of work that drives those at the sharp end of policy making mad! For them, the issues debated here are too complex: more practical policy options (such as those proposed by Heinz) need putting on the table for discussion, prioritisation, acceptance or rejection. The acid test, ultimately, for bridging research and policy lies not only in plausible theory but also in advancing measures that move beyond general propositions and can be considered strategically for conversion into meaningful practice.

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