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Youth prospects

Patrick Ainley reviews a comparative study of young people's situation in the UK and Germany.

John Bynner and Walter Heinz, (2021), *Youth Prospects in the Digital Society. Identities and Inequalities in an Unravelling Europe*. Bristol: Policy Press, 170 pages, £25.99

John Bynner has been central to studies of youth 'transitions' in the UK for two or three generations - depending on how successive generations are defined. This is one of the definitional problems facing studies comparing successive 'age cohorts' to answer what Phil Cohen in 1997 called The Youth Question: 'how the decline in the political cultures of the manual working class, and the rise of structural youth unemployment affected the formation and outlook of non-student youth'.

Famously 'it took a riot' for Thatcher's government to delegate the Manpower Services Commission to take unemployed youngsters off the streets with a succession of Youth Training Schemes throughout the 1980s. At the same time the Economic and Social Research Council's *16-19 Initiative* followed its *Social Change and Economic Life Initiative* by focusing university sociologists and psychologists on changing transitions from school to work in economically contrasted areas of the UK. Drawing upon a large data set managed by John, then Professor at City University and now Emeritus at UCL's Institute of Education, the initiative revealed what he later called a 'prolonged adolescence' (seen by some in the USA as a new stage of 'emergent adulthood') as 'non-student youth' migrated from schemes to colleges to universities.

The youth question thus moved up the age range and became the subject of a *Learning Society Initiative* incorporating academic education research with the Department of Education. Today a government-funded 'charity', the Education Endowment Foundation, has £4.6m from the UK Research and Innovation quango (of which ESRC is now a part) to monitor the effects of Covid upon 10,000 English children as they leave school. Against this narrowing of the research base, John has continued to fly the flag for independent academic inquiry, extending it to Germany with Walter Heinz.

This book reports their collaboration comparing young people's experiences and government responses to their situations in the two countries in the same way qualitative and quantitative area studies were combined in the *16-19 Initiative* in the UK but now reaching from the impact of new information technology in the 1990s to the present 'Covid-generation'. It is therefore not only an informative summary but records theoretical responses to the changing situation from, for example, Ulrich Beck's 1992 *Risk Society* notion on, so that this book will be a valuable resource for anyone still teaching youth and education studies. As their subtitle indicates, the authors also suggest a 'potential unravelling of the EU triggered by Britain's decision to leave' that their concluding policy proposals seek to contain.

Of course, cross-country comparisons are dogged by definitional difficulties, not just in explaining England's FE colleges to Germans who lack

equivalent institutions but translating back the German 'dual system' of work and study that Englanders often confuse with tripartite schooling; let alone English idealisation of German apprenticeships removed from their institutional context and also their current difficulties that Heinz makes clear. Deep cultural differences often contribute to such misapprehensions - of *beruf*, for instance, a notion implicated in individual identity, like a traditional English 'profession' but shared with craft and other workers. Above all, it is often not appreciated (even in England!) that selection is the dominant purpose of every level of institutionalised learning in England with the result that, as Tim Brighouse quipped, 'no matter how far you go in the English education system, they'll fail you in the end!'

Of course, such confusions are rooted in differing historical constitutions of class across countries and (English, German and other) readers may balk at Heinz's characterisation of the German middle class comprising 60 per cent of the population divided evenly into two segments: 'traditional and new middle class'. At the same time English conceptions of class are confused by the erosion of the traditional manual divide in the employed population in what has become the UK's post-industrial economy, as compared with the at least partial survival of German productive industry. Nevertheless, Heinz describes Germany's middle class 'fearing downward social mobility' for their children forced into a growing precariat 'due to globalisation and digitalisation of work'. Similarly, many young people in the new working middle of English society see themselves running up a down-escalator of devalued educational qualifications so as not to fall into the growing gig-economy beneath.

And what of shifting gender identities as nearly 60 per cent of young English women apply for higher education compared with around 40 per cent of their brothers? In Germany, young women resist state incentives to have more children but in contrast to the UK do not instead seek careers - whether or not they achieve them with lower female employment rates and higher levels of part-time working as everywhere in Europe. In Southern Europe welfare regimes dictate dependence upon parents but even in Greece with 40 per cent youth unemployment in 2018 as compared with around 33 per cent in Italy and Spain (UK 11.3 per cent, Germany 6.2 per cent), birth rates are falling. This is not only because of later 'emergent adulthood'/'prolonged adolescence' reducing the time for family formation, child bearing and rearing but is a secular trend across all developed economies.

Across Europe, outwith the book's core polarity between UK's 'financially driven capitalism with declining industries and a flexible labour market' and Germany's 'social market economy with social partners and a regulated labour market', Covid has widened social inequalities, especially for marginalised

and precarious youth. This is key to John and Walter's concluding proposals for enhancing cohesion to maintain social solidarity. Here they aim not just to predict the future, but rather to make it possible. So they urge the use of digital media to encourage new types of occupation and employment for which digital competence is a basic skill alongside literacy and numeracy. Education is thus the central pivot of the digital society with internet education and media literacy as part of socialisation from smart families through to lifelong learning. 'Ironically', they add, 'this is less about content than the culture of social cohesion'.

Some (smaller) EU countries enjoy these advantages already: the Baltic states, for instance, combine IT specialisation with near-universal fluency in the digitally ubiquitous English language. While Denmark, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands rate highly on major indicators of connectivity such as internet use, integration of digital technology and digital public services. Elsewhere and universally, developing citizenship identity in different versions and levels - regional, national, European and global, demands 'a new kind of citizenship' of which young people are already often pioneers. In this 'awakening . . . many see themselves as admonishers and saviours of the planet on the world stage of the internet'.

Despite their efforts, anomic unravelling might seem inevitable - if not of the interwoven generations into a competing mass of individuals, then of the EU itself whose survival is not inevitable. So, to promote the solidaristic weaving together of identities the book concludes:

. . . it is essential that capability acquired through education and the digital society is continually directed at improving the quality of life for every citizen. We need unrelenting engagement in the elimination of all forms of discrimination and exclusion and universal protection from such hazards as COVID-19. Only governments, supported by an educated public, can ensure ultimately that this transformation happens, which is why we hope this text will contribute to better futures in using the Internet for Everyone. This is our final answer to the youth question.

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